



## Queen of Ash and Dust by RobinDanielle

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**Summary:** Stuck in a barren wasteland, Rachel Porter sets off on a journey with the last gunslinger to find the Man in Black. But what happens when he finds her first? Can she resist his dark embrace and follow the path that Maturin has set her on? The battle for Rachel's heart and soul continues. And the stakes have never been higher. (Sequel to Stroke of Midnight.)

# 1. Chapter 1

*Author's Note: This is a sequel to my story Stroke of Midnight which can be found under the Movies/IT category.*

Rachel could see the brightness through her closed eyelids. She moaned and tried to move, but she had no energy. The brightness dimmed a bit and she tried to open her eyes. They felt dry and caked with grit.

"Hey, girl."

The voice sounded faint, but had a gruffness to it. And someone was shaking her as well.

"Girl? You alive?"

Finally she opened her eyes. A man was crouched over her. His face was shadowed due to the bright sun that was behind him. Rachel brought a shaky hand up to shade her eyes. The man had dark skin with super short hair that hugged his skull. His eyes were narrowed, though if it was because of the arid wind that blew or he was trying to study her better, she didn't know.

"Where am I?" she asked in a raspy voice. Her throat was parched.

"The Mohaine Desert. How did you get here?" the man asked.

Rachel glanced to the side. All she would see was dust: dry, cracked, light gray dust. Her heart started pounding. She tried to sit up, but decided to prop herself up on her elbows instead. She glanced the other direction. Same thing.

"I don't understand. How did I get here?"

"That's what I want to know. You don't remember?"

Rachel saw in her mind Pennywise hanging on the edge of the gaping hole, about to fall in. She remembered feeling both sorrow and relief. He had grabbed her with a tentacle and pulled her towards him. Then he had let go and she fell.

"You alright?" the man asked.

"I remember falling. But that doesn't tell me where I am. Or who you are."

"My name is Roland. And you're in Mid-World."

Rachel raised her eyebrows at him. "Mid-World? What, like Middle Earth? Like as in hobbits and wizards and all that?"

Roland sighed and shook his head. "We need to get you out of the sun. You're not making any sense at all." He held out his hand for her to grab.

"Join the club." Rachel reached out and Roland grabbed her and pulled her to her feet.

"So which direction were you headed?" Roland asked.

Rachel scrunched her face up. "Uh...would it freak you out if I told you down?" She pointed downward.

"Down? So you're trying to get underground?"

Rachel could clearly hear the confusion in Roland's voice. She sighed. "I was underground. And then I fell even more underground. Down a hole— a big, wide hole."

"So someone brought you back up?"

"Or back out. Look, I am really confused and hot right now. Can we find us some shade?"

Roland let out a laugh that sounded more like a bark. "Be my guest." He spread his hand in a showing gesture.

The white, hard-packed sand stretched as far as Rachel could see. She placed her hand on her flat belly, suddenly glad she wasn't too far along in her pregnancy. She was beginning to think she was going to have a difficult journey ahead of her.

"Well which direction were you headed?" she inquired.

"I'm going after someone. And actually, I suggest we get moving, if you're up for walkin'?"

Rachel scowled. She didn't know if she could trust Roland, but right now he was her only shot at figuring out where she was and then getting back home.

"Sure. I lost someone as well. Maybe we can find who we're both looking for together."

"Don't be so eager. You might not like the person I'm looking for."

Roland started walking, so Rachel decided to join him.

"Well mine's not exactly all fun and games either, so you're in good company." Rachel let out a shaky laugh.

"So what's the last thing you remember?" Roland asked as they walked.

"I just remember falling. And then I woke up here."

"Down a hole, right?"

"Yes. Look, I know that sounds crazy, but it's true. I have no idea where I am right now besides in a desert, and I know that I was in Derry, Maine and this most certainly is not it."

Dust blew into Rachel's mouth and she started coughing.

"Yeah, you're gonna have to get used to that," Roland commented. "The dust."

"Oh joy," Rachel muttered under her breath. She coughed again.

They continued in silence for a while. Rachel was surprised Roland didn't ask her any more questions. After a while, Rachel's skin started to feel hot. Sweat dripped down the back of her neck and she was grateful she had thought to put her hair up in a ponytail. Finally clouds started to cover the sun, the only relief from the dry, desert heat. Rachel wondered if it ever rained out there. Couldn't have been much when it did, for the only bit of vegetation to be found around

were large clumps of dry, crunchy looking grass.

She started to wonder where Pennywise had ended up. Had he returned to where he had come from, or was he too stuck in this barren wasteland? She stopped short. She could call him. Reach out to him like she had the day Chris had almost accosted her in her kitchen. Could she do it? Would she dare? And was he even close enough to hear her?

Roland realized she had stopped and stopped as well. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"No. Just...thinking about someone. Wondering what happened to him." She caught up with Roland.

"Do you think he is here?"

Rachel's mouth grew into a pout. "I don't know. I don't know what happened to him."

"There's a town coming up. A small village named Pricetown. We can ask about him there."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"How many times we keep having to stop."

"Hey I don't exactly go walking through deserts every day, alright," Rachel retorted as they set off again.

"Better get used to it. We've got a long walk ahead of us."

Rachel slumped her shoulders and made a pouty face. This was going to be a long day indeed.

After what seemed like an hour (or maybe it was just minutes. Who knew?) Rachel and Roland came to a particularly tall dune. Rachel trudged up it with legs that felt like lead. *Please let there be something*

*on the other side. Anything. I don't care if it's Pennywise waving a bloody arm at us*, she prayed. They halted when they got to the top. Rachel's heart dropped. More desert. At least the sun was getting lower. She glanced down and saw something at the base of the other side of the dune. It looked like the scattered remains of a small fire.

"Roland." Rachel tapped his arm. He glanced at her and she pointed.

"Finally," he breathed. He made his way down the dune. Rachel slowly followed. When she got to the bottom, Roland was knelt down with his hand over the remains.

"How warm is it?" she asked.

"Cold. He's been gone a while." Roland looked around as if expecting to see a black speck on the horizon.

"It would be nice if we knew which way he's headed."

"He's headed east." Roland started picking through the ashes. He picked up a burnt piece of what looked like bacon and started eating it.

Rachel made a face. She was hungry, but not that hungry.

"We will rest here for the evening. Pick up our trail in the morning."

Rachel was exhausted. The heat had been draining. She sank to her knees.

Roland took off his leather trench coat. "Here. You're going to need this."

He held it out to Rachel. She eyed it hesitantly. "I can't."

"Take it. It gets cold at night."

Rachel put on the coat. If it was damp from his sweat, she couldn't tell as she was covered with it herself.

"I never told you my name," she realized.

He turned to face her. "Oh? And what is it?"

"Rachel. My name's Rachel."

He nodded. "Nice to meet you, Rachel."

She smiled. Roland seemed nice enough, in a gruff, western movie type of way. But she was grateful for his company. She eventually decided to settle down. Finally, the sun started to set. Rachel shivered. Roland got up to pull some of the dry grass that Rachel had been seeing random patches of.

"Whatever you do, don't watch the fire," he said as he bent to lay it over the burnt grass that was laying on top of the ash pile.

"Why not?"

"This is devil's grass. Border dwellers believe that devils live in the fires started by it. If you look at it, they'll hypnotize you and draw you into it. Then you'll be stuck in the flames."

"Well that sounds charming."

"It's probably superstition, but I don't like to risk it."

"Don't blame you." Rachel pulled Roland's coat up under her chin. "So what's in Pricetown?"

"Nothing much. I'm hoping to get some food there. A mule. Something."

Roland took out a small steel rod. Rachel watched as he struck it against a piece of flint.

"Spark-a-dark, where's my sire? Will I lay me? Will I stay me? Bless this camp with fire."

Roland's voice was so soft, like he was saying a prayer.

"That was pretty. What was it?"

"An old blessing from my realm, used for hearth and home."



He struck the flint a few more times, then finally a meager flame started.

"So you're not from here either?"

Roland sighed. A deep, weary sigh. "No."

"I almost feel like we're in purgatory. Or at least I think *I* am."

"And why would you think you deserve to be there?" Roland bent and blew lightly on the fire to help it spread.

"Because I loved someone I shouldn't have. Someone bad."

"Was he bad to you?"

"Not particuallly." Rachel shifted her position. "And I really don't feel like talking about it just yet."

"Fair enough." Roland took off his guns and laid them across his lap. "You should get some rest. I'll keep first watch."

Rachel frowned at him. "You don't sleep when you're by yourself?"

Roland shrugged. "Not much I can do about it if I am killed in my sleep. You I can at least warn."

Rachel laid down on the hard pan ground. "Thanks for that, I guess. I feel bad for you though."

Roland fingered his pistol. "It's a gunslinger's life.

"Gunslinger?" Rachel asked as she tried to get comfortable.

"Sleep. I will tell you my tale one day."

Rachel took a deep breath and settled down. At least the dune behind them gave them relief from the wind.

That night she dreamed of a little girl with long cooper curls. I had been weeks since she had dreamed of her unborn daughter. Eleanor ran through a field of red poppies as Rachel watched. A tall tower stood behind them. Next to Rachel, their guardian, Roland, silently

guarded the two.

And Rachel felt true peace for the first time in weeks.

## 2. Chapter 2

Rachel could have cried when she first saw Pricetown. First from relief when she saw it from the distance, and then up close when she saw what a ghost town it was. If a town was what you could call it.

After two days, the relentless desert was finally starting to fall behind them. Rachel was surprised she could even still keep herself upright. She could still taste the ash in her mouth from eating nothing but the scraps that the man Roland had been pursuing had left behind. Roland still hadn't told her who he was. But neither had he questioned her about Pennywise much to Rachel's relief. She still had yet to mention him to her new traveling companion and was hoping against hope to keep it that way for as long as she could manage.

The dry wind continued to whistle in Rachel's ears. And she was sure her face was becoming chapped. She stumbled. She had been doing that a lot lately. Roland shot her a worried look. Rachel put her hand over her stomach as another bout of nausea rose up in her. She needed food, blood, something. As they neared the first house, Rachel heard a braying sound. They stopped.

"I hear a donkey," Rachel said.

"I hear it too," said Roland. "We need to find where it's at. Ask if we can buy it."

The trudged forward. Ghost town indeed. Rachel heard an echoing pounding sound, like someone was beating a hammer. Sure enough, it was a bedraggled man beating on a piece of tin that was coming loose off the top of a shed. She saw a woman sitting on a porch in a rocking chair shucking corn. Rachel's mouth started watering. She licked her lips. It took all her willpower not to go snatch an ear from the woman. Finally they came to the house that had the mule. There were two scraggly horses as well. They both had dirt caked on their sides and haunches. Their backs twitched as a small cloud of flies kept landing on them. Rachel felt bad for them.

*How can anyone survive in a town like this, much less livestock?* she wondered.

A little further down the road was what appeared to be either a meager general store or a bar. Maybe it was both. Roland approached the house with the mule, Rachel at his side. The steps up to the porch creaked.

"Let me do the talking," said Roland. "And you might want to stand behind me."

Rachel frowned. "Why?"

"Just trust me."

She did as he asked. Roland knocked on the door. The wind whistled around Rachel.

*Raaachel. Raaachel.*

Rachel glanced to the left. Was that her name she had just heard?

*Raaaaaachel.*

She whipped around. And then she was it. A red balloon in the middle of the street. Her heart started pounding. He was here. Pennywise was here.

She bounded off the porch into the middle of the street, searching around frantically.

"Rachel?"

She ignored the gunslinger. Pennywise was still alive. The dust continued to blow around her. It was flying up in the air now. Rachel turned and turned. She wanted to cry out to him, but her voice seemed to be stuck in her throat. And then she stopped. Just behind the back corner of a house, she saw him. And to her surprise, there was no anger. There was no resentment. All there was, was joy.

Rachel stood frozen, staring at her mate. Wind blew more dust between them, but there was no that he was definitely there. Should she go to him? What would she tell him, now that he was actually before her?

It didn't matter. Not anymore. Before she could take three steps, something large slammed into her from behind. Strong arms wrapped around her and lifted her off the ground, pulling her with him. She opened her mouth to scream, but her breath came out in a whoosh.

A stagecoach thundered past her. She stared after it in shock. Roland filled her vision. He placed his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

Rachel pointed towards where Pennywise was. "I..."

"Didn't you see the coach coming?"

Rachel glanced back, but Pennywise was gone. So was the balloon. Had she imagined things? Was the desert sun getting to her?

"Rachel?" Roland waved his hand in front of her face and she finally met his gaze. "Did you see something?"

"I think I..."

Should she tell him? She sighed wearily. If Pennywise had been there, she would definitely run into him again.

She shook her head softly. "Nothing. It's nothing. Must just be the heat."

"Well let's get you inside," Roland said softly.

Rachel felt a twinge of guilt. Roland had been so good to her these last couple of days, made sure she was fed, even though the pickings had been meager. How would he react when he found out about Pennywise, about what he was?

She let Roland lead her back to the house. She took one final glance around where she had seen the balloon. Nothing.

Roland knocked on the door. No one came. He knocked a second time. Rachel could hear footsteps inside, and finally the door came open with a squeak. A man's head poked out. He had short, thin hair and a milky eye.

"What ye want?" the man asked.

"We are weary travelers just come across the Mohaine. We hope to buy a mule...and some food if you can spare any."

The man's eyes traveled up and down Rachel's body. He idly scratched his thin belly.

"Come in. I'll see what kind of business I can do with ye."

The door opened the rest of the way. Roland entered first, followed by a wary Rachel. She didn't like how the man had looked at her. But she didn't worry. For sure Roland would let no harm come to her. Not that she wouldn't be able to defend herself. The man couldn't have weighed much more than her. And he didn't have Pennywise's blood in him.

The man's meager hovel had a rich, meaty smell to it. Rachel scrunched up her face. Her stomach roiled. She wanted to cover her nose with her mouth, but didn't want to appear rude. Once they were all inside, the man turned to face them.

"So what can I do ye for? Ye say you want ma mule? Gonna have to pay for him."

Roland gave a nod. "Yes I am aware."

The man gave a nod towards Rachel. "The girl need to eat? I got some fresh beans a'cookin'." The man went to an old cast iron stove. A small pot bubbled on top of it.

"We don't want to take more than you can give."

The man opened a cabinet and pulled out a small wooden bowl. "Nonsense. A girl's gotta eat. 'Specially one in her condition."

Rachel blinked a couple of times. She glanced down at her flat stomach. Her condition? She was only six weeks along. There was no way the man knew. Unless he meant her appearance. Did she really look that bad? She decided to play it off with a laugh.

"Yes I supposed I do look a little haggard. This is the desert after all."

She shrugged.

The man still had his back to them. He was spooning some beans into the bowl. "Yes it is time we get a little blood in ye."

Rachel's smile fell. "Blood?"

The man turned. "Bean. I said beans. What'd ye think I said?" He grabbed a spoon and handed the bowl to Rachel who stood staring at him with her mouth agape.

"I...nothing. I must have misheard you. Thanks."

She took a spoonful of beans. They looked fairly hard still. But food was food. She blew it off so as not to burn her mouth.

"So what ye goin' for, gunslinger, with this young lady in tow?"

Rachel narrowed her eyes. This man sure was taking a good bit of interest in her.

"Heading to Tull. It's personal business."

"Ahh. Eat yer beans, kitten, so we can talk." The man tilted his chin towards Rachel, a sly grin on his mouth.

He led Roland towards a table and pulled out a chair. Rachel stared after him with her spoon halfway to her mouth, which was gaping wide open. Kitten? She slowly placed the spoon back into the bowl. She swallowed.

Pennywise. It had to be Pennywise. But how? Was this Pennywise himself or had he possessed this man? And if it really was Pennywise, was the real man dead, perhaps behind his house somewhere?

Rachel spotted a rickety stool next to the door and perched herself on it. The man told her to eat. Even if he wasn't Pennywise, she was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. She took a bite of her beans and tried not to make a face. They were still half hard. But she ate with gusto. The man spoke to Roland about the mule. Roland reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. He held it up for the man to see. The man's eyes grew wide. He leaned forward.

"Well, well, well. Is that real?" He grabbed the coin from Roland.

"Yes."

Rachel eyed the coin. It looked suspiciously like gold.

"I uh... I don't have the change for this."

Roland leaned forward as well. He rubbed his jaw. "Not expecting it. Do we have a deal?"

The man gave a nod. "Aye. A deal indeed. The mule is yours."

Roland stood. "Good. Do you have any extra crop we can take as well? Some corn?"

The other man stood. "Well now, that might cost extra."

Rachel placed her spoon back in her bowl with a clatter. "What? He already paid you extra. And you gave me food without question."

"Little ladies like you need to eat," the man told her. He squinted one eye at her. "You've got a long journey ahead of you, ain't ye?"

Rachel glanced over sheepishly at Roland. Time for her to test her Pennywise theory.

"Maybe we shouldn't take the mule after all," she told the man in an authoritative voice. "I'm sure we'll be fine."

She stalked across the room.

"Well now I never said-"

"I know what you said," Rachel spat as she plopped her bowl on the table between the man and Roland. "You just said that his coin was more than enough and now you want extra." She crossed her arms across her chest. "Sounds like you're trying to swindle us."

The man nodded slowly at her, a sly grin playing across his mouth which he now revealed to be full of rotten teeth.

"Spoken like a true queen," he said admiringly.



Rachel scowled at the man as he confirmed her suspicions.

"A queen?" She decided to play along. "Tell me, what queen must be forced to live on ashy campfire remains?"

"Times will get better fer ye, kitten."

Rachel shook her head at her mate angrily. "Someone promised me that a long time ago. And now I'm in Hell because of it."

She tried to walk past him, but he grabbed her arm.

Roland jolted forward. "What are you-"

Rachel stared at the man with a look of shock. He stared at her with a glazed look in his eyes.

"Blood is life out here. You are life out here."

Rachel tried to pull away from him. And then she smelled it.

Blood.

She glanced down as the man pulled his other hand up. He had a knife in it. Blood dripped from his palm.

Rachel's mouth fell open and she pulled harder. "Penny, please," she whispered.

"Let her go," Roland growled.

The man clamped down on her arm harder. "Blood is life. Stay true to who you are..." he leaned over towards her, "or die."

Rachel stared at him in horror. She's had enough. Pennywise or not there was no way she was going to down his blood in front of Roland. Anger started to well up in her. Anger at Pennywise for getting her stuck in this Hell hole.

She grabbed her bowl of beans and mashed it against his face. He let her go with a hiss and she took off running. She ran out the door and stopped when she got on the porch. The smell of blood still lingered

in her nostrils.

"Fuck."

She took a shaky breath. Her eyes. Roland would see her eyes. She knew what they would look like. She shakily walked around the porch. There had to be something. And then you saw it. A bucket near the porch. It was half full of water. Rachel jumped down. First she splashed her face. The water was lukewarm. She splashed it again. And then she stared down and waited for the water to calm down.

"No, no, no," she said when she saw her reflection.

Her eyes were gold.

"Fuck me."

Rachel hit the rim of the bucket, making the water slosh around. Roland would have questions. And she would have to answer them. One way or another. She owed him that much.

But would her new comrade be able to handle the truth? That her husband was a monster.

And so was she.

### 3. Chapter 3

*Rated for blood drinking and sexuality.*

Roland stood watching Rachel from the porch.

"Are you alright?" he inquired.

She swallowed. "Yes."

Rachel walked around and met him at the steps.

"Was that the person you were talking about? The one you are looking for?"

Honesty was the best policy, Rachel decided. If she was being screwed over by having to be stuck in this place, at least she could choose the position.

"Yes and no."

Roland came down the steps, the clump of his boots reminding Rachel of the twisted western movie situation that was her life now.

"And what does that mean?"

"The person that I'm looking for has...abilities. He can somewhat...influence people."

Roland eyed her carefully. He came up until he was directly in front of her. "I am going to ask you one question and I want you to answer me precisely and honestly."

Rachel scowled up at him. It was as she had thought. Her encounter with Pennywise had caused Roland's trust in her to be shaken.

"Alright."

"This man that you are after, is he a man of black? Does he wear a lot of black?"

She blinked at Roland, unsure of how to answer him. "He...does when he's in human form."

Roland knit his brow. "Human form?"

"My husband is a shapeshifter. Mostly he takes the form of a circus clown. But sometimes he takes the form of a young blond man. And yes, Roman does wear mostly black."

"Define young?"

Rachel spread out her arms. "He's...my age. What are you getting at, Roland?"

"What other abilities does he have?"

Rachel huffed out a loud puff of air. "He can create illusions, he's super strong, he can teleport."

"And you've never seen him in any other form besides this...clown?"

She glared at him. "No."

Roland nodded. "Good. Sorry for so many questions. But I needed to make sure."

He tromped past her and she stared after him. He went around the porch and she followed.

"Made sure of what?"

"That you're not with him."

Rachel stopped short. "Not with who?" she called after him.

"Walter," he called back.

"Well that explains everything," she grumbled.

She started after Roland again. Something shiny fell out of his coat pocket but he didn't notice. Rachel picked it up. It was a plain silver cross. She rubbed the rough surface. So Roland was a God fearing man. Maybe if she had more of God in her life she wouldn't be in this

predicament. But then again, not even Maturin had helped. And he had actually warned her.

Roland was at the fence gate now. He started to unlatch it.

Rachel showed him the cross. "You dropped something."

He barely glanced at it. "Keep it."

"Oh. Are you sure?" She tried handing it to him again.

"Yes."

Roland opened the gate. The rusty hinges squeaked loudly. He leaned against it. "Let's get one thing straight. I don't know what your husband's like, but the man I'm after is worse. Far, far worse. You need to be on guard. Always. You understand?"

Rachel nodded.

"Good. Now I'm going get us a mule."

Rachel watched him, suddenly feeling ten times worse about the secrets she was keeping from him. So this Walter fellow was bad. But was he a demon? Did he munch on children like normal people ate hamburgers or pizza?

She shook her head. "And the drama continues," she muttered out loud. Then she went meet Roland to help him acquire their new steed.

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Rachel started to nod off for what felt like the tenth time that evening. And her stomach rumbled. Her brief respite from living off of Walter's campfire remains had long since faded away. She shifted in her saddle. Her rump was sore, but at least she wasn't walking like poor Roland. She had supposed he was used to it by now, but still.

The lights of Tull shown like immobile fireflies in the near dusk. Rachel swallowed. Her throat was parched. She frowned once more as she once again remembered Pennywise's blood tease.

*He better not do that again, she thought irately, or I might just slit my wrist and get it over with. Let myself die off and get this little trip through purgatory over with. At least I'll get one more last drink of blood.*

She let out a dark chuckle. She was starting to sound like a vampire again. She didn't even know if her eyes were still yellow and there was no way in hell she was going to ask Roland.

The first thing they passed was a tiny graveyard. Scanty wooden crosses and shoddy slabs of wood served as tombstones. Several yards past a painted sign read TULL. Faint piano music filled the air. Rachel's eyes scanned every bit of movement she saw, not that there was much. A small girl and boy played chase in the streets, their bare feet kicking up little poofs of dust. Three women stood at a corner in saloon dresses, their ample bosoms threatening to pop out of their bodices. One of them laughed heartily.

Finally they came across what appeared to be some kind of barn. A man stood outside in dirty overalls. He wore a straw hat that had some kind of bird feather sticking out of it. Roland approached him. He spoke to the man. Rachel's eyes roved around her surroundings again. Another ghost town type setting. At least this one had a few people milling about. Of course there was only one person Rachel cared about seeing. She closed her eyes and listened to the howling wind. Maybe she would hear her name again. Just maybe.

She felt a hand on her thigh and jumped in her seat, her eyes flying open. Of course it was Roland.

"He's gonna watch the mule for us. You want to grab something to eat? Find a place to rest?"

What a question.

"Please."

He held out his arms, but Rachel managed to jump down, though her landing was a bit wobbly.

"Did he suggest a place to eat? Like a restaurant or something?"

"He said there's a place called Sheb's. It's up the street a bit."

She gave a nod.

They walked in silence. After a block, they passed a small group of men. They watched her and Roland walk past. What an odd pair the two of them must have made—the tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in cowboy garb and the girl in the tee shirt and long jean shorts and tennis shoes. She subconsciously patted down her shirt. Roland must have noticed.

"Tomorrow we can get you something more appropriate to wear. Some trousers or something."

They passed a lady and a man. The woman was wearing some black pants and a high collared blouse.

You pointed at the pair. "You mean like her?"

"Something like that."

The piano music got louder. Then Rachel spotted what had to have been their destination. The swinging doors were even there, just like out of a western movie.

"I take it that's Sheb's?"

Roland adjusted his holster. "Seems to be. Let's go."

Rachel's heart started pounding as she and Roland crossed the boardwalk. She was actually going into a wild west saloon. Would she have not been so tired and half starved, she would have almost felt giddy.

"Remember, let me do the talking," Roland reminded her.

"No prob, Bob," she muttered. "Just get me some food."

They walked in. Rachel found their piano player. He was sitting in the far corner playing something that sounded oddly like an old Beatles song. A group of men sat playing a card game in the middle of the room. The bartender was female. A blonde that appeared to be in her forties. She was wiping down the bar. She wore an old faded blue dress. Rachel noticed that one side of her face was scared. Other

than that, she seemed attractive enough, or would have been at one time.

Roland approached her. "You got meat?" he asked her.

The woman nodded. "Yessir."

"I'll take two hamburgers and two beers, if you please."

Rachel licked her lips. She was never one to drink alcohol. She didn't even know if it was safe for Eleanor, but seeing as this was one time and Eleanor was Pennywise's child, she was sure it wouldn't make a difference. The woman asked Roland for money. He placed a gold coin on the counter. The woman raised an eyebrow and picked it up. She glanced up at Roland. Rachel had to hide a grin at her dour expression.

"I ain't got change for gold."

"I didn't ask for it," came Roland's stolid response.

The woman glanced over at Rachel. She gave the woman a small smile. The woman took the coin. Rachel's stomach rumbled. The bartender made the beers and set them down in front of Rachel and Roland. Rachel took a big swig and made a face. She hated beer. But it was wet. She drank some more.

Finally their burgers came. They were more like lumpy meat on sliced bread. But it was food. Rachel ate heartily. At least the meat was salted.

A man with grey hair and tattered clothes came up behind Roland and clapped his hand hard on the gunslinger's shoulder. Rachel and Roland both turned to face him. The man looked like death walked over.

"A gold for a favor, gunslinger-sai. Just one? For a pretty."

The man's voice sounded like dust. Rachel slouched down in her seat, trying to make herself look small. Roland handed the man a gold coin. He walked like a zombie to a nearby table, turning the coin about in his hand as he did so. The men playing cards abruptly got



up from their table. They ran out the door. The piano player followed soon after.

Rachel only wished she couldn't say she'd seen stranger things.

"Sheb!" The woman screamed after the piano player. "Sheb, you get back here goddamnit."

The old man, meanwhile, had seated himself at a table. He spun the gold piece on the rickety wood and hummed to himself.

"There. You've driven out my trade. Happy?"

The bartender glared at Roland. Rachel felt anger rise up in her. It wasn't Roland's fault. But the woman had fed them, even if she had just been doing her job.

"They'll be back," Roland reminded her.

She harrumphed. "Tomorrow yeah."

"Who is he?" Roland gestured at the old man.

"Why do you want to know?" the now angry bartender demanded.

"I need to know. I'm looking for a man who might have been through here. You would remember if he did."

The woman's face seemed to soften. "I'm guessing you know my price. I'm sure you can pay it."

Rachel's mouth fell open. She was offering Roland sex. Rachel glanced back and forth eagerly between them. Would he at least get Rachel a room first or leave her on her own?

"It doesn't have to come to that. We can come to some other agreement."

Rachel let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

The woman slammed an empty glass down on the bar. "So I'm not pretty enough. Or is it her?" She gestured at Rachel with her chin.

"You gonna fuck her instead?"

Rachel couldn't stop herself. "And you expect him to fuck you just because you asked? Do you have that little respect for yourself?"

The woman glanced down at Rachel's legs. "You ain't exactly dressed prim and proper yourself, sister."

"You bitch."

Roland had to step in front of Rachel to stop her. "Rachel, calm down."

"Calm down? She just called me a goddamn whore. She's the one who..." She shook her head.

"Please let me handle this," Roland said softly. "Please."

Rachel took a deep breath. Who was she to decide what Roland needed to do to get answers? He was just as stuck on this journey as she was. But deep down she was fuming.

"Do what you have to do," she told him icily. "I can take care of my fucking self."

Rachel burst through the doors, hot anger coursing through her like lava. Roland should have been finding the two of them some rooms, not going to bed with some prostitute. She stood out on the boardwalk, her chest huffing. The arid air hitting her face was a comfort for once. At least it was fresh and didn't smell of cigarettes and cheap beer.

"This is bullshit," she spat as she stalked off towards the barn. At least the mule would keep her company. And at least she had some food in her stomach, even though it wasn't exactly Burger King.

"They probably don't even have fries in stupid Mid-World."

She knew she sounded childish, but she didn't care. She made it back to the barn. The man in overalls was gone. She found her mule.

"Hey buddy," she crooned as she rubbed his muzzle. "They treating

you good? Huh?" Who's a good-

"You know it's not safe for a lady such as yourself to be wondering the streets at night," came a voice.

Rachel jumped and put a hand to her chest. Leaning against the barn door was what appeared to be a young man. He was dressed all in black and had a loose black overcoat and a black bowler's hat. His face was obscured by shadow. He looked like he could be a character from *Oliver Twist*.

Rachel wasn't in the mood. "I'll be fine. Thanks."

"Are you sure about that, miss?"

She tried again. "I said I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern."

She went back to patting the mule.

"And what about the babe you carry? Is she fine as well?"

Rachel's hand froze. How could this man possible know about Eleanor?

Unless he wasn't a man.

Rachel turned slowly. She was standing across the way from him. It was still dark, but his head was lifted now. And there was no mistaking his full lips. He walked into the light from the only lantern that was lit in the barn.

Rachel took a shaky breath, barely able to hold in her joy and relief.

"Roman."

She ran to her husband and threw her arms around him. He returned her embrace.

"I knew it was you. I knew it was you back in Pricetown."

She pulled away from him to look at his face. In an instant, Roman's lips were on hers. She kissed him back like her life depended on it.

Like he was air and she was drowning.

"I can't believe we're here," she said when she broke the kiss. She threw her arms around him more tightly. "What are we doing here, Roman? What is this place?"

"Shh. It's gonna be okay, kitten. I think this is another dimension. One that's connected to yours."

She pulled away from him again. His anxious gaze mirrored her own.

"What are we doing here? Please don't tell me you brought us here. I wouldn't be able to bear that."

"Shh." He put his hand on her cheek. "You need to calm down. Think of the baby."

She stared at him in shock. "The baby? That's all I've been able to think about. You and our baby. That's the only thing keeping me from completely losing my shit, Roman."

She turned her back on him and crossed her arms over her stomach. "I've been here a week, Roman. A week."

"I know, my love. You think I don't feel bad about this? Do you know how hard it's been seeing you with him?" Roman grabbed her shoulder and turned her to face him. "I ache for you. Like I've never ached for anything. I want to hold you. To comfort you. Make love to you. But I have to watch you walk around with him. The *gunslinger*." He turned his back on her. "You are my mate, Rachel. There should be nothing standing between us."

Rachel's mouth fell open. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was Roman actually jealous?

"Baby, there is nothing going on between me and Roland. You know that, don't you? We're just traveling companions. He has been the one helping me to survive all of this."

Roman sighed. "I know, kitten. But you know how protective I can be of you."

Roman turned around. Golden eyes stared back at Rachel. Pennywise eyes. She wondered if her own mirrored his.

"I know that. You showed me just that at Pricetown." She placed her hand on Roman's chest.

"You still thirst for it." Roman lifted her chin. "My beautiful queen. My mate." He leaned in towards you. "Will you drink from me?"

His voice was a whisper. It sent chills down Rachel's spine and surprisingly a tingle to her groin. She shivered. But for some reason, she was reluctant.

"I hate that I have to rely on that," she whispered. "It used to only be when I would smell it, I would crave it." She snorted. "Now I could drink a gallon of it."

Roman took off his hat and threw it in the hay. His overcoat went next. He pulled up his left sleeve. "Your wish." He elongated one of his nails and slowly drew it along his wrist. "My command."

Rachel's legs started shaking at the sight of it. When the smell hit, it was like a flood washing over you. Roman grabbed her hand and gently led her into the shadows of the barn.

"Drink from me, my queen."

Roman lifted his wrist to her. Rachel's heart thundered against her rib cage like a beast trying to escape. She put her lips to his cut...

And liquid desire exploded in her mouth.

She latched on like a leech and sucked. A loud moan escaped her throat and she closed her eyes. Sweet, hot blood ran down her throat. Her legs were trembling so badly, she couldn't stand anymore.

"Ohh, kitten. Yes. Good girl," Roman moaned. "Good girl."

Rachel went down into a crouch, bringing Roman with her. She kept drinking. A deep, sharp ache quickly filled her groin. It had been so long, too long since she had felt like this. She didn't care anymore about that Pennywise had kidnapped her brother. Or that he had

tugged her down a hole. It was her and him now. In the dark.

Let Roland have his whore.

She quickly started to unbutton her shorts. She couldn't stop herself. She plunged her hand downward. She was already wet. She started rubbing her clit.

"Ohhh."

Her lips finally left Roman's wrist. Her blood lust had been sated. But now she craved something else. Roman watched her hand with a look of hunger on his face.

"Oh, kitten. Lay down for me."

He gently pushed her back until she was laying down on the straw. Roman was over her in a flash, his lips on hers. The kiss was rough and full of need. He broke away from her and started pulling at her shorts. It did not take long to remove them. Next he started to unfasten his pants. Rachel reached down and pulled her panties off.

When he slid into her, she let out a silent moan. He started bucking against her. She laid back on the hay.

Let Roland have his cheap saloon whore. Rachel was being bedded by a king.

Pennywise was back.

## 4. Chapter 4

Roland stood on the boardwalk, his dark eyes carefully scanning back and forth. He didn't see her. Of course it was still night. And of course she wouldn't stay around. But where would she have gone?

He should never have let her leave. He had gone upstairs with the bartender, whose name he had learned to be Allie. They had talked.

He hadn't been able to do it. He let out a heavy sigh.

He shouldn't have let her leave. Walter could be anywhere. Roland started back towards the way they had come from. He would check the barn. That was where her mule was. Maybe someone had seen her.

He didn't see the man in the overalls. He must have gone home for the night. It didn't take long for Roland to find her. She was lying in a pile of hay. She was on her back with her long dark hair pooled next to her. What appeared to be her clothes was lying scattered around her. But it wasn't that that made Roland stop short.

It wasn't that she was naked. That would have almost been better.

She was covered with a coat.

A long black coat.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Roland had one of his pistols out in a flash, pointed towards the source of the voice.

"I would ask if you wanted to take a turn next..." The Man in Black idly stepped out of one of the stalls, his long fingers working at buttoning his shirt. "But that just wouldn't be your style, would it?"

Roland watched Walter, not saying anything at first. He glanced back at Rachel.

It didn't take a genius to connect the dots.

Roland cocked his pistol. "What did you do to her?"

"Who me?" The Man in Black pursed his lips, gave a slight shake of his head. "I didn't do anything. Except give her someone to be there for her."

Roland's chest was heaving now. He took a couple of steps towards the man he had been tracking for way too long.

"You took her."

"I didn't take anything. She freely gave herself to me."

Roland's hand started to squeeze the trigger. Not that it would have done any good. Except wake up the girl he had supposed to have been protecting.

The girl that was now lying in the straw. Had he tricked her somehow? Used his power of persuasion on her? So many questions. But only one answer to all of them.

Rachel had been raped by the Man in Black.

And Roland hadn't been there to stop it.

"You should have seen how distraught she was. How more than happy she was to run into my arms," Walter continued.

"You tricked her," Roland spat.

"Of course I did," Walter bragged. "You don't know how easy it was. Young girl, lost in a foreign world, pining for her husband."

Roland grit his teeth, his eyes returning to Rachel's sleeping form. *Just pull the trigger*, he told himself. *Get it over with.*

But of course it wouldn't have been that easy. And with the luck both Roland and Rachel were having, Walter would have simply deflected the bullet and it would have hit her somehow.

"You're watching her again."



Walter was right in his ear. Roland jumped. The gun went off. Roland turned but Walter was already gone. Roland saw him standing by the open barn doors.

"Sooner or later the eyes do wander, Roland. Just make sure they don't wander too far. I'm not the only bad boy you have to worry about anymore."

Walter sauntered off. Roland's gaze returned to his young traveling partner. He mentally cursed himself. She was sitting there watching him, holding Walter's coat up to cover herself.

(((O)))

Rachel's heart was hammering in her chest and her ears were ringing. She stared at Roland in shock. She had almost jumped up when she'd woken up but then remembered she was naked. She held Roman's coat against her chest.

"What happened?"

"Just a coyote."

"Did you shoot it?"

Roland seemed to droop. "No."

Rachel sat up straighter and tucked her legs to the side. She started glancing around when she realized someone was missing.

"Roman. Roman?" she called out. "Roman?"

"There's no one here," Roland said.

"Well he couldn't have gone far. You shouldn't be here. My husband's here now and he gets jealous. Really jealous. You shouldn't-"

She stopped. Why wasn't Roman with her? He wouldn't have just left her lying so vulnerable like that. Something wasn't adding up. Maybe he went to feed.

"No."

Roland stepped towards her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just..." Rachel glanced around at her scattered clothes. "I need to find him. I need to get dressed. Can you wait outside please?"

Roland nodded. "I won't be far. Do what you need to do."

He walked out.

Rachel went to reach for her panties and she stopped. Why wasn't Roland still in the saloon? Had his business with the woman ended that fast? Had they even done anything? Rachel scowled. She was lying in hay. She and Roman had made love in a pile of hay. In a barn. She grabbed her panties and threw the coat aside. Roland had been so good to her so far. And she was the one who had had to make love in the hay like she was the whore. She wanted to tell Roland off so badly. But was it worth it?

Rachel stood. The ground rushed away from her. She gasped. She had expected for her legs to be shaky as they usually were after having sex. But it was just the opposite actually. She felt strong. Energized almost. She lifted her arms and flexed her fingers. Drinking Pennywise's blood had always made her feel good, but in a euphoric, floating way. Now she felt solid. She felt whole. Even her nausea was gone. But it wasn't just her body that felt different. There was a different taste in her mouth. It wasn't the usual sweet, tangy taste of Pennywise's blood, but something different. It was bitter, but not an unpleasant bitter. More of a bitter sweet, like dark chocolate.

"Weird," she muttered.

She dressed quickly. Now that her tiredness was gone, she needed to find Roman. Or Pennywise. Whichever form he was lurking around in right now. She pulled bits of hay out of her hair and left the barn. Roland was right outside.

"I need to find my husband," she announced as soon as she saw him.

"We can find him tomorrow. You need to rest."

"Yeah well maybe you should have thought of that after we ate our burgers."

Roland sighed.

"Look, I don't give a damn if you had sex with that woman or not. But my husband was just here with me. And now he's not. And I need to find him."

She started past Roland, but he grabbed her arm. She stared up at him.

"We can find him tomorrow."

Rachel narrowed her eyes at him. Why was Roland acting like this?

"Look, I get it alright. You're scared to let me go again. But I'm not scared anymore. My husband is here now and he can sure damn well take care of me. Even more than you can. So you either come with me or don't, but I will find him, Roland."

(((O)))

The look on Rachel's face tore at Roland's heart. She was angry at him. She had every right to be. But a sick feeling had settled in Roland's stomach. He could still see her lying in the hay. Could see Walter Padick coming out of the shadows buttoning his shirt, his demonic lust now sated. He should have protected her.

He had failed. It wouldn't happen again.

He let go of her arm. "I'll go with you. But I need you to stay close."

She nodded. She started out into the street but then stopped, her eyes, which Roland couldn't have helped but noticed were amber again instead of gold, darting back and forth.

"Uh..."

"You don't know where he would have gone, do you?"

(((O)))

Rachel's eyes darted back and forth. Roman was nowhere. None of this made sense. Where could he have gone?

"Uh..."

"You don't know where he would have gone, do you?" Roland asked.

"No."

Rachel was starting to feel nervous. Pennywise had to have been feeding somewhere. But something was off. The night was quiet. If her mate would have been around there would have been-

Rachel heard a scream. She whipped around. It had come from her right. She heard another scream. It sounded like a woman.

"Shit."

She took off running down the street and stopped when she came to a house. The door was opened. She ran inside.

And came upon a scene that she hoped and prayed never to have to witness.

A woman and two children sat huddled in the corner. It was the same boy and girl Rachel had seen earlier playing chase in the street. Something big and lumbering was standing in front of them.

His claws were extended. He was about to go in for the kill. She had to get the clown's attention now before it was too late.

"Pennywise!" she screamed.

The clown advanced on them some more. It was as if her mate hadn't even heard her.

"Pennywise!"

Roland came even with Rachel, his guns drawn.

She grabbed his arm. "No!"

He rounded on her. "What? That creature will kill them."

"No he won't. Just give me a second."

Now Rachel wanted to scream in frustration. Why wasn't Pennywise listening to her? How could she get his attention? She needed an anchor. Something to remind him of who he really was more than anything.

Rachel's prince. Her true love.

And she was his princess.

*"Do I love you because you're wonderful? Or are you wonderful because I love you?"*

Pennywise paused. Rachel sang some more, her voice ringing loud and clear.

*"Are you the sweet envision of a lover's dream? Or are you really as wonderful..."*

Pennywise turned slowly. Just seeing his face almost brought tears to her eyes. He retracted his claws.

It had worked. She had gotten through to him. Rachel smiled and this time her eyes did tear up. She decided to continue.

*"Are you the sweet envision of a lover's dream?"*

Pennywise came up to her. He lifted his hand.

*"Or are you really as wonderful..."*

He touched her face with his gloved fingertips.

A tear fell.

*"As you seem?"*

Pennywise's yellow orbs scanned her face. They turned light blue. The beast had been tamed. For now. Rachel threw her arms around him. She buried her face against his chest and wept.

"Please don't ever forget me. Don't ever forget us."

Pennywise put his arms around her. "Never, my kitten."

(((((O))))

Roland watched this strangely morbid spectacle unfold. The monstrous clown bearing down on the mother and her children. He had gone to stop it, but Rachel had stopped him. Stopped him from killing the monster. And then things had gotten stranger still. She knew this monster. And she sang to it. She sang it a song of love. The creature had even responded. Apparently it knew her as well.

Roland watched as the creature came to her. He had reached out and touched her cheek. It was a touch of fondness. Perhaps of love. And then she embraced it back.

Roland slowly lowered his guns. He remembered something Rachel had told him just a few days earlier. Her husband was a shapeshifter. And he had liked to take the form of a clown. Rachel's husband was not human. And from what it had appeared he was about to do to these people, to these innocent children, he was no better than the man who had just left Roland moments before. The man who had taken Rachel and the just left her lying in the straw.

And Roland couldn't help but wonder...if *this* monster had once done the same.

(((((O))))

Pennywise's chin was pressed against Rachel's hair. He had finally gotten out of that pathetic excuse of a bind that that equally as pathetic sorcerer had placed upon him. It hadn't taken much.

He sniffed his mate's hair. She didn't smell right. It was a dark, tainted smell. One that Pennywise had just smelled all too recently. A smell that had come from him. The sorcerer. The Man in Black.

It was all over Pennywise's mate. Pennywise knew now why the sorcerer had tried to stabilize him. To get to her.

The Man in Black had done something to Rachel. Something that had should have been for just Pennywise himself.

Pennywise's eyes turned blood red. The Man in Black had put his hands all over Pennywise's mate.

And he was going to pay. With his life.

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A couple of miles away the Man in Black watched all this play out in the smoke from his campfire. Saw the clown embrace the girl.

"You are a naughty little minx, aren't you?" he said to the smoke. "And your bond with him is stronger than I thought."

But it was no matter. The seed of darkness that the Man in Black had planted in her would take root soon enough. She had drunk his blood and had melded her magic with his, not that she had been aware of it.

Walter's pants got tight as he thought of what had transpired not even an hour before. He could still feel her young, supple body beneath him, feel her tight sheath around his cock. He would play the game out, enjoy the chase.

And pretty soon, the demon clown's mistress... would become his.

## 5. Chapter 5

Rachel felt her mate tense up under her embrace. She pulled back from him and gasped.

Pennywise's brow was furrowed. His eyes were blood red.

Rachel took a step back from him. "Penny." She said his name softly. "What's wrong?"

She could feel his anger rolling off of him. The clown slowly turned his head to the right. She followed his gaze. The only person standing there was Roland. Rachel frantically glanced back and forth between him and her mate.

"Penny. What is it? It's just Roland. He's a friend."

A grin played at Pennywise's mouth. Rachel didn't like this. The only other person she had seen him look like this towards was Chris.

That confrontation had not ended well.

"Friend, is he?"

Pennywise took a step towards Roland.

"Should a friend not look out for someone? For someone they should be protecting?"

"I have protected her, jester. Perhaps you should have been more considerate."

Pennywise hissed. Rachel heard a ripping sound and glanced down at his hands. The claws were out.

"Oh my God. No." She moved between Pennywise and Roland. "Penny, stop. Stop acting like this. I know you haven't been with us, but Roland is one of the good guys. Why are you acting like this towards him?"

Pennywise pointed a finger at Rachel. "And you stand defending him.



He who let you out of his sight? He who let that other male human, that sorcerer, lay claim to what is mine?"

Rachel narrowed her eyes at her mate. "What are you talking about? You were with me. Roman was with me. I wasn't alone. And I sure didn't see anyone else."

Pennywise bent over. He started laughing, a hoarse, maniacal laugh. He started muttering to himself.

"Tried to subdue me. He tried to subdue me to get to her. Yes he did. And he found her. He found her and he did something to her. What did he do? She smells different. Pennywise cannot read her mind. He must have blocked it somehow."

Rachel watched in horror and confusion as Pennywise rambled on. What in the world was he talking about? And why was he talking about Roman as if he was a separate person? She felt a hand on her shoulder.

Roland's voice was in her ear. "We should leave. He's not in his right mind."

But Rachel couldn't move. Something Pennywise just said had stuck in her mind. *He found her and did something to her.* And he said she had smelled different.

Pennywise had placed both of his hands against the wall. His claws were now digging into the wood. She could hear his breath coming out in growls. The family of three had already fled. Rachel didn't blame them.

"Rachel, this isn't safe."

She smelled different. He had said she had smelled different. And someone had done something to her. An icy cold feeling started to fill her chest.

Someone had been in the barn with her that night. Had shared intimacies with her.

And it hadn't been Roman.

Rachel ran from the house. She felt like she was in a daze. Her legs were shaky and somehow she made it back to the barn. She found the spot where she had been laying at.

It was gone. The black coat was gone.

Rachel fell on her knees. Someone else had been there with her. Had had their hands on her. Been inside her. Someone who had pretended to be her husband. Rachel started shaking.

"No. No."

Someone had violated her, used her for their own sick and twisted pleasure.

Someone with the power to shapeshift.

Rachel swallowed the bile that had now risen in her throat. Was it the man Roland had been after that had done this to her? She let out a choked sob. Had he been in Tull all this time, waiting for them? Did he do this to get back at Roland for something? Rachel tried to see it all in her mind. She had embraced Roman. They had talked. And then she had...

She put a hand over her mouth as a sick feeling filled her stomach. She had drunk someone's blood. Someone who wasn't Pennywise. She felt bile start to rise up as she thought of something else. This person had known things about her. He knew she was pregnant. He knew she drank blood. Rachel closed her eyes as she saw Roman riding her, filling her deep with himself. His mouth had been on hers, his hands on her breasts.

She had had sex with someone who wasn't her husband.

Rachel stared seeing red. She stood on shaky legs and made her way like a drunk person to an empty stall. She threw up the very little that she had in her stomach.

And then she passed out.

(((((O))))))

Roland watched Rachel kneeling in the middle of the barn. He had done this. Maybe not directly. But he had still been responsible. He felt a stab of pity for the poor girl. He felt a presence next to him.

"Look what you've done to her, gunslinger."

He already hated the clown. Hated his squeaky voice, his poofy orange hair. Hated the power he had over Rachel.

"You may not have laid a hand on her, but I will find the one who did. I will find him. And I will feeeeast. Feast on his flesh. And then I will come for you. And you will face my judgement."

"And you think she's going to be happy with that? Who will she have in this world? You think you can protect her from Walter any better than I could? You don't know him apparently."

Roland never took his eyes off of Rachel as he spoke. She put a hand to her mouth. He ached to hold her. To comfort her.

Pennywise chuckled. "Then you do not know me. Asssk her. Ask her what I do to those who get in the way. To those who mess with the human that I call mine."

*If she is yours, then why aren't you in there with her?* Roland wanted to yell. Rachel stood and went into an empty stall. Roland grit his teeth.

"Maybe you should go to her," he shot at Pennywise.

He finally glanced at the clown. But it was gone. Roland heard Rachel throwing up.

He sighed. "What in the hell have I gotten myself into?"

He was going to meet Rachel when he heard something hit the ground in the stall where she was at. He picked up his pace. Rachel was on the ground. She had barely missed her small pool of vomit. He quickly bent down and started shaking her.

"Rachel? Rachel?"

No response. He went into the stall. He had trouble getting her out of

there because of the tight space, but he managed to carry her out. He had to get her some help. He didn't know if she was ill or if she had just passed out from shock.

He went back to the saloon. He kicked at the door since he couldn't knock. No one answered. He hollered at Allie to open up. Finally he heard footsteps. She opened the door. Her eyes grew large as she stared at the girl in Roland's arms.

"I need your help."

Allie opened the door wider. "Get her inside."

Roland held Rachel against him as he carefully made his way up the stairs. She still hadn't woken up. Allie opened a door and told Roland to place Rachel on the bed. He did as he was told.

"What happened to her?" Allie placed her hand on Rachel's forehead.

"She fell ill. Passed out."

Allie quirked an eyebrow at Roland. "Is that all that happened?"

He just as soon tell her.

"Someone took her.... The Man in Black."

Allie quickly withdrew her hand as if Rachel had burned it. "And you brought her here?"

There was no mistaking the sting in her voice. "There was nowhere else."

"And if he comes looking for her?"

"He won't."

"And you're so sure?"

Allie went to light a lamp that was on a table next to the bed. "I'll get her some water. But I will expect coin for this," she barked. "You owe me something, gunslinger."

Roland sighed. "Yes. You will get paid for your trouble."

Allie grabbed a pitcher from on top of a rickety dresser. She left the room. Roland glanced down at Rachel. She looked so peaceful. Just as she had in the barn. Roland sighed again. He really needed to get that out of his head. It was no use feeling guilty about it. But he couldn't help feeling that way.

He crouched down next to her. She really did look like something from a fairytale out of his childhood. Now that her dark hair was loose from its bindings, it fell loosely about her. He gently placed a hand on her forehead. She was so strong. She never complained. Maybe in another life she would have made a fine gunslinger. Maybe he even could have loved her eventually, even as young as she was. Just maybe.

"You just get well," he told her sleeping form. "Just get well."

---

The desert wind howled like a legion of demons. Pennywise threw his vengeful gaze around the top of the cliff. His prey was here somewhere.

"Nice to see you again."

Pennywise whipped around. The Man in Black was standing on top of a pile of large rocks.

"Lovely view. You should come up and join me."

Pennywise started jumping on rocks. He couldn't get even with him, so he had to stop at the rock just below him. Pennywise furrowed his brow in anger. No one should have been above him.

"Not surprised that you found me. Too bad you didn't find *her* sooner. We'd be having a whole different conversation right now."

Pennywise snarled. "You dared to touch her, miller's boy."

"Well, well, well." Walter jumped down to be even with Pennywise. "Looks like you know things about me as well. I'm impressed."

"I know your pathetic existence is finally up, Randall Flagg. Is that not also what you are known by?"

"I am known by many names. Just like you. You see, you and I are just alike. We've both been around the universe. Both desire power and chaos." A sly grin lit up his tanned face. "Both bedded the same girl."

With a growl, Pennywise flew at Walter. The Man in Black disappeared at the last second and Pennywise was over the boulder. He landed in a crouch several rocks down. He quickly teleported himself to the base of rocks on the other side. The Man in Black was standing at the edge of the cliff. There was no way Pennywise could touch him now without going over himself.

"Ahh, so the Eaters of Worlds and Children has learned to feel human emotion," Walter taunted. He made a pouty face. "How sad."

"What do you want with her?!" Pennywise cried.

Walter laced his hands behind his back. "You know I truly am amazed. You are a god, Pennywise! And yet you seem so eager to protect this girl. To love her. She is carrying your tentacles around in her pocket and you don't even know it."

Pennywise started to get into a crouch again. His alien blood boiled. Walter had him right where he wanted him.

He took a step towards the dark sorcerer. "*What* do you want with her?"

"The same things you do. Except I have no desire to hide beneath the dirt with her. Or at least...not just in the dirt. Or should I say hay." He flashed the clown a dazzling smile. "Ta ta."

The Man in Black jumped backwards over the side of the cliff. A few seconds later, a large raven flew off. The moonlight glinted silver off its black feathered body.

And two deadlights shown in the demon clown's eyes.

---

Roland's eyes snapped open and his head came up. He had fallen asleep in a chair next to Rachel's bed. But something had woken him up. The light of early morning shown through the curtain.

Rachel moaned. She tossed and turned. So that's what had woken him. Roland went to her side. She moaned again, loudly.

"Rachel," he called softly.

Another moan. More tossing and turning.

"Rachel."

He gently put his hand on her bare arm. It felt warm. He removed his hand and placed it on her forehead. Rachel had taken a turn, and not for the better.

She was burning up.

## 6. Chapter 6

*\*\*\*If you are easily triggered by certain things, please read with caution.\*\*\**

*Whoosh!*

Rachel was standing in the street. There was smoke all around. People were running. Screaming.

*Whoosh!*

It was like a large shadow passing overhead. Fire shot down from the sky and hit a house not several yards away from Rachel. More screaming.

It was like something out of a movie. But what could have possibly be setting fire to the town of Tull? She heard a flapping of large wings. And then a creature out of a fairytale settled heavily on the roof of a nearby house. Rachel stood frozen, her amber eyes fixated on the creature. It was large and black and winged.

A dragon.

The creature turned its large head. And stared straight at Rachel. It narrowed its large orange eyes and slowly drew its tongue across its mouth. Rachel knew she should run. But to where? The dragon swooped off like a shadow. And that's when Rachel took off running. The old mercantile store that Rachel had noticed when she and Roland had come into town stood behind her. She threw the door open and ran inside.

Outside the large dragon, which was about the size of a large horse, swooped towards the ground and disappeared into a cloud of smoke. And then someone walked out in its place.

A man dressed all in black, with dark blue eyes and short, dark brown hair. He idly made his way towards the mercantile store while the small western town burned around him.

---



Allie was wiping down the tables. The saloon wouldn't be open for a while now. She scrubbed more roughly than she probably needed to. He had brought the girl back. Allie had been hoping Roland would have changed his mind and come back to her, but that had not been the case.

The Man in Black had come back to Tull. But why bother preying on some girl? The girl had been dressed kind of funny, with her short denim trousers and form fitting, barely there shirt. Maybe she was some sort of magic user herself. Maybe she was the Man in Black's mistress and that was why she had been with Roland, for protection.

"Where is she?"

Allie jumped at the unexpected voice and bumped into the table. She whirled around. A young man stood before her. He was tall and thin with short brown hair and a black shirt.

"Who?" Allie croaked out.

"The girl with the gunslinger. Where are they?"

"S-she's sleeping. She fell ill last night. He brought her here."

"Is she upstairs?"

Allie was at a loss. She didn't know this young man, but apparently he knew Roland and the girl.

"You ain't gonna hurt them, are you?"

The young man didn't answer. He stalked off towards the stairs.

((((O))))

Roland watched as Rachel continued to toss and moan. He had tried waking her. He shook her, called her name. It was no use. It was like she was stuck in some nightmare. And there was only one person who could have been responsible.

The bedroom door banged open. Roland whipped out one of his pistols. A young man stood in the doorway dressed in a similar

fashion to Rachel.

"Who are you?" Roland demanded.

The young man's green eyes flashed towards Rachel. He started towards her, but Roland got in his path.

"I said, who are you?"

"Are you really going to shoot me, gunslinger?"

Roland cocked his pistol. "That depends on who I'm talking to."

"You met me last night. I was...in a different form than this."

Roland narrowed his eyes at the young man. This was Rachel's husband.

"Roman?"

"What's wrong with her?"

He went to step around Roland, but once again, the gunslinger blocked his path.

"Let me ask again, who are you?"

The young man scowled at Roland. Then his face started to change.

---

Rachel sat crouched inside a rack of clothes. Her heart was pounding and she was breathing heavily. She didn't know what she was even doing in here. She should have run. The dragon could just as easily set fire to this place too.

She heard someone whistling. She closed her mouth and sat as still as she could.

"Well, well, looks like we got us a little game of hide and seek."

Rachel didn't recognize the voice. It was a strong male voice. She tried to make herself as small as she could, hoping that the person would decide not to look for her and go away.

A blast of wind blew the clothes from around her. Rachel screamed and closed her eyes. When she opened them, a man was standing before her. A man wearing all black with a black trench coat.

A coat that looked startlingly familiar.

"That's better," the man crooned. "Hello, kitten."

The man smiled at her. Rachel's breath caught in her throat. This had to have been the Man in Black.

The man who had tricked her into having sex with him.

---

Roman's eyes turned yellow. His lips turned cherry red and two matching lines showed up along his cheeks towards his eyes.

"Like I said, you met me last night."

Roland lowered his gun a bit.

"You need to let me get to her," Roman said.

"I can't do that," said Roland.

"You *have* to let me get to her. I am the only one who can wake her up."

Rachel moaned loudly behind Roland. He didn't trust the clown, but he had no choice.

"If you do anything to her, you get a bullet through your brain."

"If I can't save her, you're very welcome to shoot me. Cause she'll probably be dead anyway."

Roman pushed past the gunslinger.

He sat on the edge of Rachel's bed and placed a hand on her arm. Her skin was hot to the touch.

"Kitten," he said softly.

He placed a hand to her forehead and closed his eyes.

---

"What do you want with me?"

Walter sauntered towards her. "Now is that any way to address the man who saved your life?"

"What?" Rachel couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You didn't save my life. Roland did."

"Maybe so. But I was the one who found you."

Rachel tried to wrack her brain. She shook her head.

"You don't remember, do you? I guess that was my bad. But at least there are some things you do remember."

He reached out to touch her. Rachel deflected his hand with her arm. "Don't touch me!"

"Well aren't you a feisty one? But then I guess you have to be, being the mate of Pennywise. I can't imagine he would want anything less."

"Leave my husband out of this."

"*Rachel.*"

Rachel glanced around. She had heard her name. But there was no one there.

"What do you *want* with me?"

Walter's eyes roamed her body. "Well first off, this little Keystone Earth look has *got* to go."

He touched her stomach with his fingertips. Rachel's clothes started to feel strange, like it was turning into foam. She glanced down at herself. Not foam, she told herself. Ash. Even her shorts were changing, the rough denim fabric melted away into the soft grey substance. Had she have been in a different situation, the sensation would have almost been erotic feeling. The ash flattened and came

together, turning into a soft fabric. A way too short, asymmetrical light grey dress started to take shape.

(((((O))))))

In her room, her husband and guardian watched the same thing happening. Each of them stared on in shock as Rachel's clothes began to morph before their eyes. Roland knew he should have turned away as the fabric of her shorts fell away and turned into the skirt, but he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Somehow, whatever the sorcerer was doing to her in the dream that he had her stuck in was happening to her in real life.

And there wasn't a damn thing either man could do to stop it.

---

Rachel took a shaky breath. She ran her hand up the outside of her thigh. The fabric was soft to the touch. She glanced at her chest. Her bra was gone. She could see the outline of her nipples perfectly. She blushed crimson.

The Man in Black smiled. "Much better."

He placed his hand on her thigh. Rachel closed her eyes. Hot, angry tears pooled up behind them. To her embarrassment, one of them fell.

"Ahh, what's this about?" Walter's voice was soft as he reached up and wiped the tear off her cheek. Rachel jerked her head back at his touch.

"Why don't you just rape me again and get it over with?"

Rachel hated how small her voice was.

"Now, now. Is that what you think I did?"

Rachel angrily wiped her tears away. "What else would you call it then? You pretended to be my husband."

"Yes I did do that. But you need to understand something, sweet

thing."

"And what is that? That you're an egomaniacal evil ass jerk who likes to use his power to take advantage of innocent girls?"

Walter chuckled. "Innocent. I like that."

*"Fight him, Rachel."*

There was that voice again.

*"Rachel, listen to me. You have to fight him!"*

"Shut up, Pennywise! Let the grownups talk!" Walter called out.

Rachel gasped. It was Roman talking to her.

*"Remember who you are, kitten! Remember!"*

Rachel closed her eyes. She tried to call out to her husband. *"Roman! Where are you?"*

(((O)))

Roman still sat on Rachel's bed, his hand pressed against her forehead.

"Rachel! Baby, I don't know what's happening to you. But you have to let me in. This isn't real. None of this is real. Whatever he's doing, you have to focus. Focus on my voice. Let me in, baby."

(((O)))

Rachel scrunched her eyes closed. She tried to focus. To focus her and Pennywise's magic, just like she had done when he had helped her to feel Eleanor. She felt Walter's hand glide up her side. She was almost there. She could almost feel Pennywise. She stared sweating, from the mental strain and from the fact that she was so enclosed, both by the clothes hanging around her and the man standing so close in front of her.

She almost had it.

There.

Walter's lips slammed into hers. Rachel's eyes flew open, her focus now lost. He pushed her back into the clothes. It gave way, but not near enough. Rachel opened her mouth to breathe and Walter's tongue slipped inside. Rachel whimpered. His tongue found hers. His hands came around her and slid along her back, down to her ass. Rachel started shaking and started sweating even more. Her heart pounded against her rib cage. She needed to get out of this. She closed her eyes as Walter continued to force her to make out with him. She needed to find an anchor. She thought of Eleanor. She could see her in the tower, her small daughter holding her tiny hand out for her mother to grab. *Take me home. We don't belong here.*

Walter deepened the kiss. Rachel's hand came up to place it on his chest. To both her surprise and horror she realized that not only was she not fighting him, but she was actually enjoying his mouth on hers. Walter pressed himself against her. Rachel moaned.

No. This wasn't right. Walter's hands came around and Rachel could feel him lifting the hem of her skirt.

Roman had done that not too long ago.

Roman.

She remembered that night behind the Neibolt house. When he had undressed her under the moonlight after their play. *I don't want to be without you anymore.* That was what she had told him. And then they had made love for the first time.

What would Roman think of her if he would see her like this. Could he see her now, wherever he was? Rachel's eyes popped open. She pulled herself away from Walter. He gave her a charming smile. He was breathing heavily.

"Now that wasn't so bad was it?"

Rachel felt a hot fury fill her being. She felt the power in her hands. She had it. Finally. She gave Walter a fake sweet smile.

"Actually it was pretty nice. But there's just one problem." She placed

both of her hands on his chest and focused her energy.

"You're not my husband."

Rachel gave a mental push. Walter was thrown back. Rachel didn't waste any time. She closed her eyes and concentrated again.

"Penny, get me out of here!"

---

Rachel cried out. Her body was on fire. She tried to sit up, but hands held her down. She was lying down on something soft. Her body was covered in sweat. Liquid fire, or maybe it was lava, felt like it was running through her veins.

"Ahhh!"

"Rachel?"

It was Roman. He was hovering over her, his hand caressing her brow.

"It burns, Roman!"

"What burns, kitten?"

"Everything!"

Rachel felt like she was dying. Or coming back to life. She didn't know for sure. And then, when things felt like they couldn't get any worse—they grew catastrophic.

Pain. Deep, seated pain, shot through Rachel's abdomen like a knife. She gasped. Her hand flew to her stomach.

Rachel cried out. Somehow she was able to lean over just in time to throw up. Roman held her in place so that she didn't fall off the bed.

"Roman." Her voice was a whisper. She clutched her stomach. "My baby, Roman."

(((((O))))



Roman watched his mate, feeling totally helpless. He could tell she was in severe pain. She said that she was burning. And now there was pain in her stomach. That could have only meant one thing.

Something was wrong with Eleanor.

Rachel leaned over and threw up. Roman kept his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Roman. My baby, Roman."

Roman froze. It was happening. His mate, the only human that he actually gave a shit about, was about to lose their baby.

Eleanor was dying. And for the second time in his long existence, he, Pennywise, Eater of Worlds and Children, decided to ask for help.

He turned to Roland. "I think she's losing the baby."

The gunslinger just stood there staring at him. "What?"

"She's sick. She's losing the baby. Get some fucking help!"

Roland left the room. Roman turned back to Rachel. He gently squeezed her shoulder.

"Hold on, kitten. Both of you hold on."

The pain couldn't get any worse. It just wasn't possible. Rachel just wanted it to end. But it wasn't over yet. She felt a wet sensation between her legs. It was growing larger by the second. With a shaky hand she weakly pulled the covers back. She vaguely noticed that she was wearing the same dress from her nightmare. She smelled something. Something that was now becoming an all too familiar smell. She had to force herself to sit up. She glanced down.

If she could have willed her heart to stop beating, she would have.

A pool of blood soaked the sheets beneath her. Rachel opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"No."

Rachel let out a choked sob. There was no way this was happening.

"No."

She didn't notice the door open again. Didn't notice that the gunslinger had re-entered the room. She didn't notice that her husband was now standing or that both men just stared at her with looks of shock and sadness on their faces. There was nothing they could do. There was nothing anyone could do.

"Nooooo."

Rachel started sobbing loudly. She had lost her. The one shining light that Rachel had still had left in her life.

"NOOOOO!"

Rachel covered her face with her hands and started wailing. Nobody moved. The entire room was as still as the grave.

Because basically...they were standing next to one.

Eleanor was gone.

## 7. Chapter 7

Gone. Eleanor was gone.

Rachel sat with her knees drawn up. Her dress had ridden up, a solid reminder of how real her nightmare had been. What would have happened if Roman hadn't pulled her out? Would Walter have used her to satisfy his lust again? And if he would have pulled her out sooner, would it have saved their baby?

Probably not.

The bartender had come back, along with a man in glasses. He carried a small black bag. Rachel rubbed her stomach as if that would make the pain go away.

As if it would bring her daughter back.

A fresh wave of tears started to flow. How could she have let herself get pulled into this situation? Would there have even been any way to avoid it? Even Maturin had confirmed that she was meant to be Pennywise's mate.

How long had the Turtle even known about her? Why didn't he just set her on the path to Roland? The gunslinger wouldn't have done this to her. Wouldn't have put her in this predicament. And yet somehow, instead Rachel had drawn the attention of two of the biggest evils the universe had to offer. *Claps for Rachel*, her inner voice applauded.

Yes how cruel the universe could be. And here she was, a pawn. A toy. A prostitute for interdimensional men to fuck and to pass back and forth as their needs saw fit. She was even dressed for the occasion now. Clever Walter. At least he saw her for what she truly was.

Rachel's face burned. She swayed sideways. A strong hand held her upright.

"Rachel?"

It was Roman.

"She needs a doctor."

The man that had just walked in responded. His voice sounded muffled. Burning. Rachel was burning. Maybe she was dying after all. She pitched forward. Roman held on to her.

"Do something!" Roman cried.

Rachel's vision went white.

---

The sky was a light blue. But there was a shine coming from somewhere to the right. The sun. Rachel was lying on her back on something hard. She tilted her head back. Even from upside down there was no mistaking what was behind her.

The Tower. She was back in the Tower.

She glanced down at herself. Her silver dress from the first Tower trip was back. Rachel actually smiled. At least she could be away from the pain for a little while. Maybe she could even see Eleanor's spirit again.

Rachel gasped. Eleanor! She sat up quickly. She felt a cool breeze against her skin. Cool. Not burning. Yes maybe she could stay here for a while. She got to her feet. She was on the balcony again. She went closer to the edge. The same glorious view met her. The patchwork quilt of different landscapes. Rachel sighed. A content sigh this time.

She felt a cool hand grab hers and glanced down quickly. An angelic face smiled up at her. A face that Rachel had only seen a couple of times, but would never forget for as long as she lived.

Rachel's chest tightened. Eleanor was wearing her white dress again. Her eyes were more brown this time. More like Rachel's used to be. Rachel knelt down.

"Hey, sweetie."

Eleanor didn't say anything. She just smiled at Rachel. Rachel's eyes filled with tears. She gently squeezed her daughter's tiny hand.

"How are you? Are you feeling okay?"

Eleanor nodded.

"That's good. I don't know how long mommy's going to be able to stay here okay."

Another nod.

Rachel reached out and touched Eleanor's shoulder. Touched her hair. She felt so real. So solid.

The tears fell. Eleanor reached out to brush Rachel's cheek.

"Don't cry, Mommy."

Rachel cried harder. How short a time she had known this child. An how attached she had already gotten.

"I'm crying because I love you. And because I miss you."

"Don't worry, Mommy. Daddy will take care of you. And you have Uncle Roland now."

Rachel's heart swelled. How aware Eleanor had been. A powerful telepath, just like her father. But just how aware had she been? Rachel quickly tossed that thought from her mind. She was with her daughter.

"Are you going to stay here?" Rachel sniffled.

Eleanor nodded again. "Me and Maturin are going to protect the Tower together. And so will you."

"Me?"

"Yes. We will guard it up here. And you will guard it from down there."

Rachel stared at Eleanor. Walter wanted to bring down the Tower. He

would kill Eleanor a second time. Rachel stood quickly.

"I have to go. You know I love you, right?"

Eleanor nodded her little head, her curls bouncing. "And I love you as well."

Rachel knelt and embraced her daughter, a renewed strength filling her. As much as she wanted to stay, she needed to get back. There was a Tower to protect. Which meant the entire universe was at stake.

"You will always, *always* be my daughter."

There was no doubt about what Rachel had to do to get back. She took off running across the balcony.

And jumped.

---

Roman struggled and struggled to find a pulse. There was no breath. Nothing.

He pushed his hair back. What is it that humans did in this situation? CPR? He hovered over her. Should he try to get her to breathe first or get her heart pumping?

"Fuck!" Roman hollered.

He was about to start shaking her again when Rachel's eyes flew open. She took a gasping breath. She started coughing.

"Oh. Baby." Roman bent down towards her again. He put his arm on her shoulder. Rachel glanced towards him. Her eyes seemed a bit unfocused. But then she looked directly at him.

"Roman."

"I'm here, kitten."

She hoisted herself up on her elbows. "I saw her." Rachel's voice was a hoarse whisper, but at least his wife was alert. And she was

breathing.

"I saw her."

"Who did you see? Where?"

"In the Tower. Eleanor's in the Tower."

Roman sat back on the edge of the bed. She had gone back.

"You saw Eleanor's spirit in the Dark Tower?"

"Yes. I saw her, Roman. I talked to her."

Rachel started crying. But she had a smile on her face.

Roman smiled back. "That's good, kitten. She is at peace then."

Rachel nodded. "Yes. She's at peace."

Roman grabbed her hand and held it. Rachel squeezed back. She laid back down and let out a deep sigh. She closed her eyes. Roman knew that he should get the doctor to examine her, not that he would have been able to adequately. He would have to get her back to Earth for that. Maybe he should try to contact the Turtle. Not that the old skin bag would be willing to talk to him.

"We need to at least move her."

Roman had almost forgotten that there were other people in the room.

He sighed. "Yes. If she's going to actually rest, she doesn't need to be lying in blood."

"What about her clothes?" Allie asked. "She's going to at least need some for when she wakes up."

"I'll take care of that," Roman replied.

He turned his attention back on Rachel. The even rise and fall on her chest made him relax just a little more. If she was still in any pain, apparently it wasn't bad enough to keep her from sleeping.

"Is there another room available?" he asked Allie.

"Hmph. That's all there is. We can put her in the one across from here."

Roman stood. It had been a while since he had held his wife. He got into position and carefully lifted her. He inhaled. She still smelled like him. Whatever the Man in Black had done to her must have really left its mark somehow. He eyed her dress as he lifted her. The bartender had had a point. Roman could see the clear outline of her breasts. And she would definitely have to be careful how she sat. There was nothing about the dress that left anything to the imagination.

Roman started shaking and he held Rachel against him probably more tightly than he should have as he followed Allie to the other room. The gunslinger's eyes quickly scanned Rachel's body, but he just as quickly looked away. Roman grit his teeth. He took a shaky breath. He couldn't afford to go all Pennywise now. He had to exact self-control. For Rachel's sake.

Allie pulled back the covers in the bed in Rachel's new room and Roman gently placed her down. She was snoring softly. Roman smiled. His wife always was a hard sleeper. One time he had even turned into Pennywise while she was sleeping. She had slept on top of him like he was a body pillow and hadn't even noticed until she woke up the next morning. He gently placed her down in the bed and covered up to just below her neck.

"Would you like me to examine her now?" the doctor asked.

"No," Roman answered quickly.

"Pennywise."

Roman rounded on the gunslinger. "You think I'm going to let anyone touch her right now? She's sleeping. She is actually sleeping. I don't feel any pain coming off of her at all. If there's any, it's mild."

"What if she's still bleeding inside?"

"Then not even doctors from her world would be able to stop it."



Roman couldn't help but notice the concern in the gunslinger's eyes. He hated it.

"Is there any place to buy clothes around here?" Roman asked Allie.

She pointed with her chin towards the street. "There's a shop a few blocks down. I guess I can take you there. If you don't need me here anymore. I don't open up for a while yet."

Roman nodded. "Alright. You can go too," he told the doctor. "If we need you, I'm sure you won't be a problem to find."

"It is your choice. But she really needs medical attention," said the doctor.

He left. Allie was right on his heels. Roman went to follow them, but Roland blocked his path.

"What if she wakes up and you're not here? *Again*."

Roman scowled at the gunslinger. First the man didn't want Roman near Rachel, now he didn't want him away from her. It was getting tiresome indeed. He slowly approached the gunslinger and dropped his voice to where just the other man could hear him.

"I know the mind wanders sometimes. And I know it's hard right now. Believe me I'm not happy about the...state she's in. But if you *touch* her while I'm away...you'll be lucky if your hands aren't the only thing you lose."

"Then I guess we're both lucky I'm not a monster like some people."

Roman smirked at the gunslinger. "You're right. Why would she be interested in a human?"

He clapped Roland hard on the shoulder and then left.

Roland turned his attention back to the sleeping girl. He could hear her even breathing in the silent room. It was like any normal morning, if there was such a thing in Roland's life.

There was a chair. Roland sat in it.

Twice now he had been warned about Rachel. To keep both his eyes and hands off of her. Maybe he had let his eyes linger just a couple of times. It would be hard for any man not to. The girl had a way about her, quiet but strong. Or she had been. Until Walter had gotten a hold of her.

Pregnant. She had been pregnant. Had it been for Pennywise? Roland rubbed his hand across his face. He was still having trouble putting her and the clown together. None of it made sense. How did a girl so young and beautiful end up with such a creature? Had he tricked her the way Walter had? Used some kind of magic on her? Was she bound to him in some way?

He thought of her eyes. The color of amber, they had turned gold. It had been back in Pricetown, after she had run into Pennywise. Pennywise had gold eyes also. There had to be some kind of connection there, but what?

But there was another problem at hand, a more pressing situation. Walter wanted her. Why? What was it about this girl that attracted not one but two supernatural beings to her?

Rachel made a little noise. Squirmed a bit in her sleep. Roland started to stand, but she stilled again.

She had passed out and then had stopped breathing. Had stopped responding. And then she had woken up. And had said two words that had caught Roland's attention above anything.

The Tower. Rachel had seen the Dark Tower. Had seen her daughter in the Dark Tower.

Yes it was time Roland had a talk with Rachel. He just hoped he was prepared enough to hear her answers.

## 8. Chapter 8

The shop bell jingled as Roman left. He had found the most conservative yet elegant thing for Rachel that he could find: a deep red long sleeved blouse and black women's trousers. And he hadn't even had to pay for it. He had used the coin that Roland had given the man for the mule back in Pricetown. Or more likely, had given Pennywise.

Pennywise had almost regretted killing the man. Almost. But he had served a purpose. Pennywise hadn't eaten in a few weeks. Flesh was flesh in a world like this. All tasteless and underfed. Children from Earth had been the tastiest treats.

At least his mate had one less thing to worry about. Roman sighed. He still remembered that night that she had woken up from that nightmare. She had been scared to death. At least of Pennywise. Although she had always known he and Roman were the same person, she had always trusted Roman best, maybe even loved him more. She couldn't blame him. Roman was human. He was caring. Pennywise wasn't worried about being caring. He was her monster. Her mate. Roman was more for making love. For making a family. Or at least he would have been had he actually been human.

The blood. Pennywise had made countless humans bleed. Had even made Rachel bleed. But seeing her like this this morning. Seeing her sitting in a pool of her own blood, her face in her hands wailing like some forlorn spirit. That image would probably stay with him for the rest of his existence.

He finally made it to the saloon. Rachel was still in bed, sleeping. The gunslinger was sitting in a chair, his head resting on his hand. He regarded Roman with a cool gaze when he walked in.

"How is she?"

"Still sleeping," the gunslinger responded.

"Good. She needs to rest. Get over whatever's causing her to be so sick."

"You don't think it was just because of her losing the baby?"

Roman set the parcel of clothes on top of a short dresser that was to the left against the wall.

"No I don't."

Roland leaned forward, his hands laced in his lap. "You think he did something to her. Something dealing with magic."

It wasn't a question.

Roman took a deep breath. He glanced over at his wife's sleeping form. "I can read her mind like humans breathe. But last night..." He shook his head. "It was like she wasn't even my wife. Even her smell was...different."

"Different from yours?"

Roman coolly regarded the gunslinger. "You think I'm some kind of monster, don't you?"

Roland stood. "I know I watched a girl somehow convince you not to kill a family last night. And I can't help but wonder if she's had to do that before."

She had. Her own cousin. Not that that was any of the gunslinger's business.

"She's a remarkable woman. And actually I have killed in front of her before. Some human scum who was trying to get intimate with her."

Roland's face seemed to soften. "I'm sorry to hear that. It's a shame you couldn't help her this time though."

"The sorcerer will pay. You can bet your guns on that. And as far as me not being here, I don't have to explain myself to you. But I'm here for her now. And you're just going to have to deal with that."

The two men stared each other down. There was a soft knock on the door. Allie came in carrying an armful of clothes.

"If she doesn't like the clothes, I have a couple of dresses that she can try. They're old. And the bodice might be a little loose for her, but it's something."

She held them out to Roman. He took them. "Thank you."

The bartender glanced over at Rachel. "She still sleeping?"

"Yes," Roman replied.

"Good. Let her sleep as long as she needs. I gather she's just been through hell. Can I ask something? How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

A look of shock came over Allie.

"What?" asked Roman.

"Nothing. That's just...young. Would this have been her firstborn?"

"Yes."

Allie gave Roman a sad smile. "Well you have time. You seem to deeply care for her. She's a lucky gal."

Roman raised an eyebrow. *Depends on what kind of luck you're talking about*, he thought. But then he smiled at Allie.

"Well I hope I'm more than adequate for her. We are married after all."

"Roman?"

He glanced behind him. She was awake. He set Allie's dresses at the foot of the bed and went to his wife's side. She was lying on her back, facing him.

"What is it, baby girl?"

He put his hand on her forehead. It was still warm, but not quite as much as it had been earlier.

"My stomach hurts."

"I know, kitten. I'm so sorry." He caressed her brow. "Are you hot? Cold?"

"I'm a little chilly."

He pulled the covers up under her chin. "Do you need me to get the doctor again?"

Rachel's face scrunched up. She put her hand over her face and started sobbing. "My baby, Roman. My baby."

"Ohhh, sweetheart."

Roman wasn't sure where to put his hands. He needed to hold her. He didn't care that he had an audience. He pulled her covers down and crawled in and put his arms around her. She curled into his chest and bawled. And he held her.

(((((O))))

Roland watched with a sorrowful, anger filled heart as Rachel woke up yet again and start crying. His chest tightened as her husband climbed in bed with her. The clown didn't deserve her. And Roland was becoming sick and tired of watching her hurting. Someone had brought this girl to him, that much he was sure of. And if her husband wasn't going to stand up and actually do something to help her, then Roland was going to have to himself.

"I'm going to get the doctor," he told Allie as he brushed past her.

Allie followed him down the stairs. "Roland, you need to tell me about this girl."

"I don't know much more than you do."

"You said Walter *took* her. What does that tell you? Why would he bother with someone like her unless he had a purpose?"

"What exactly are you getting at?" Roland whirled around to face Allie.

"He copulated with her. And then she lost her baby. Somethin's not adding up here." Allie put her hands on her waist.

"Maybe his was just too rough with her."

Allie raised an eyebrow. "And I'm sure the fact that she's nineteen years of age doesn't mean anything either right?"

"That's just a coincidence."

"Coincidence is when you have a song stuck in your head and then Sheb plays it on the piano. The fact that this is now the second time that number shows up in this town concerning the Man in Black..." Allie shook her head. "Ain't nothin' good that can come of it, Roland. Nothing."

Roland drew his mouth into a line. The Dark Tower and the Man in Black. Ka had connected Rachel to both. Roland had to protect her. No matter what the cost.

The whole universe just very well may depend on it.

---

Rachel shivered. She definitely had a fever. Even with the blanket that was covering her and Roman's body warmth, she still couldn't warm up. Roman rubbed her arm and she nestled back against his chest. Her eyes burned. She closed them. It was so quiet and peaceful. She was just about to doze off again when she heard a knock on the door. She didn't even bother to open her eyes. Let Roman bother with whoever it was.

"I'm so sorry for the intrusion, but I came back to see about the girl."

The voice sounded familiar.

"Oh. Someone sent for you?" Roman replied.

"I did."

She definitely knew that voice. Rachel's heart leapt although she couldn't figure out why.

"She has a fever. I keep trying to warm her up, but she just keeps shivering," Roman said.

"Let me see."

That must have been the doctor again. Rachel coughed.

Roman climbed out of bed so that he could let the doctor get to her. Rachel instinctively covered herself back up. Her dress was so tight fitting and the fabric was so light she just as soon have been naked. Maybe that's what Walter wanted. Maybe that was his way of saying 'look at what I have claimed'. Rachel blushed crimson, just adding to the heat that had built up in her face. Pennywise would never have treated her like that. He respected her. Protected her. Or at least he had until last night, which made Rachel wonder just how much power her demon mate actually had in this world.

The doctor sat in the spot Roman had just vacated.

"Are you still feeling any pain?" he asked.

"In my stomach."

"Well that's to be expected." He went to pull back Rachel's sheet, but she stopped him.

"I need to examine you, child."

Rachel threw back the covers to her waist. The doctor started prodding her stomach. She was all too aware of the three pairs of eyes that were watching behind him.

"What are you feeling for?" she asked the doctor.

"To see if you are still bleeding inside." He felt her throat next and then her forehead. "Hmm definitely a fever. I will have to give you something for that. And for the pain. Miss Allie, can you bring me a glass of water?"

Allie left to do as he asked.

Rachel squinted her eyes shut. They burned so badly. She just wanted



to sleep. For Roman to get back in bed with her and put his arms around her again. She wished so much that she were back home. Like she should be like Dorothy laying in her bed back in Kansas saying 'I had a dream. And you were there. And you were there'. Allie came back with the glass of water and the doctor opened his little black bag and took out some kind of pouch.

"What is that?" Roman asked.

"Something to help with the pain. It will get her to sleep also."

"Give me that." Roman came and snatched the pouch from the doctor's hand.

Rachel didn't blame him for being paranoid. This wasn't her world they were dealing with. Roman opened the pouch and started examining the contents. Roland joined him.

"Looks like weed," Roland said.

Rachel sat up. "Wait, what?" Weed? Roland smoked pot?

"I don't think he means the kind you're thinking of, kitten," said Roman.

"It's devil's grass," Roland explained.

"Wait, that stuff that grows in desert? I thought it makes people crazy when they ingest it," Rachel said.

"Only if a lot is ingested over a long period of time," said the doctor.

"You're not giving this to my wife," Roman said heatedly.

Rachel flopped back down. She was getting beyond sick and tired of people fighting over what was best for her. This doctor had to know at least somewhat what he was doing. And if it would help her sleep... If it would help her get away from the pain, from the memories, at least for a little while...

"I'll take it."

They all glanced at her.

"I'll take it. Please, I can't take this anymore."

The doctor looked to Roman for approval. Roman nodded. The doctor dropped the fine dark substance into the glass of water and stirred it up. He gave it to Rachel. She sat up and drank it. It tasted bitter, like how she imagined leaves would taste. Definitely not something she would request at a coffee shop. She laid back down and closed her eyes.

(((O)))

"That should help her. If she has any more problems, please come and get me," said the doctor.

"Thank you," said Roland.

Roman shot Roland a heated look. The gunslinger sure was going out of his way to take care of Rachel. Roman thought it was time he and the gunslinger had a little chat.

"You should all probably let her rest. But someone will need to stay with her. Just in case," said the doctor.

"I will," said Roman. He and Roland shared a glance. Roman narrowed his eyes at him.

The doctor left. Allie followed. Roman walked out also.

"I thought you were staying with her," came Roland's voice.

Roman whipped around. He stared down the gunslinger. "You just love being her hero, don't you?"

"Someone needs to be. She needed help. I got it for her."

"And I am grateful for that. But it's the idea of it." Roman crossed his arms over his chest. "The idea that you've...taken this role of protector so much to heart."

"I found her in the desert. She would have died if it wasn't for me."

"True. But you forget she has someone else now. Someone who's been there for her, taking care of her."

"And look what she has been through in just one day."

Roman glared at the gunslinger. He hated that Roland was right. The Man in Black had caught him off guard. Subdued him way too easily. The sad part was, even if Pennywise had been around, what good would he have been able to do? He needed to rest. And he needed to feed.

"I have some things to take care of," he told Roland. "That means you get to play protector while I'm gone." He stepped up to Roland. "But you just make *damn* sure that's all you play at. I don't want to have to kill you. As much as I hate to admit it, she needs you. Just remember, anything you do with her while I'm gone...*Anything*...I *will* know about it."

And with that, Roman stalked off.

---

*She was flying. The landscape of rocky hills and trees zipped past her as she beat her mighty wings. Soon she came upon a canyon. A large, odd shaped structure stood before her. It was like flat topped pyramid, but looked more like something from a sci-fi movie, all metal, more like a building. She hovered at a safe distance from it. As she watched, she heard a loud rumbling noise. With an explosion, a large beam of light, like the ray guns from Ghostbusters, only a million times bigger, shot out of the pyramid into the sky.*

*Rachel stared up. And up. She knew exactly what the beam was going for.*

*The Tower. He was trying to bring down the Tower.*

(((O)))

Rachel's bed was shaking. Her whole room was shaking. She sat up. Her room was empty.

"Roman? Roman!"

Roland came in.

"What's happening, Roland?" Rachel cried out.

He rushed to her side.

"Is it an earthquake? What do I do?"

He stooped down, put his arm protectively around her. "It's okay. It'll pass."

Rachel clutched at his chest and he pulled her into his embrace. Where was Roman? Did he leave her again? Was the building going to collapse onto them? After a minute, the shaking stopped.

Roland pulled away so that he could look at her. "Are you okay?"

Rachel nodded. "What was that?"

"Just an earthquake. We have them sometimes in Mid-World."

Roland stood. Rachel shot him a dubious look. Should she tell him about her dream? She was sick and tired of not having anyone to open up to. And she already knew she could trust Roland with her life.

"How long have you been having these earthquakes for?"

"Not too long. Why?"

Rachel sighed. She turned away. Roland crouched down again.

"What's wrong?"

"I think Walter's trying to bring down the Tower."

Now it was Roland's turn to shift uncomfortably. "What makes you say that?"

"Because I saw something. I had a dream."

"When?"

"Just now. Right as the earthquake was happening."

He placed his hand lightly on her back. "What did you see? You can tell me."

"There was this pyramid. It had a flat top. It was in this canyon." She waved her hands about as she talked. "Then there was this beam. This really huge, ginormous beam that just shot up out of it."

"In a canyon, you say?"

"Yes."

Roland sighed. "And you saw this?"

"Um...I don't think I just saw it."

Roland furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"I think I was actually there somehow. But what really doesn't make sense...is that I flew."

"Flew?"

Rachel took a deep breath. Now he was really going to think she was crazy, but she still had to tell him.

"I think I had some kind of out of body experience again."

Roland removed his hand. "What do you mean? You've done this before?"

Rachel started messing with her sheets. "Yes. But it was different this time."

"Different how?"

Rachel met him with as steady of a gaze as she could give him. "Because I had wings."

Roland stared at her.

Rachel's heart was pounding. "And there's something else too."

Roland gave her a nod. "Go on."

Rachel swallowed. She had to tell him. Had to. "I've been in the Tower. I've been in the Dark Tower, Roland."

## 9. Chapter 9

Walter watched the images in the swirling blue dust. He saw the gunslinger embrace her. Now she was speaking to him, her hands flailing excitedly. She was definitely awake now. And still wearing her grey dress. The corner of Walter's mouth lifted into a halfcocked grin. The gunslinger placed his hand on her back.

"Looks like you're starting to get attached, old friend," Walter said to the dust.

He zoomed in on her face, trying to read her lips. His eyes grew wide as he caught something very clearly. She said it again.

Tower.

She was talking about the Dark Tower. She had to have been. What could she have possible have been telling him? Had she had visions about the Tower? If so, why didn't Walter read that in her that night they had been together? Had she blocked it somehow? Or had someone blocked it for her?

He stared harder at the dust as if that would somehow make her magically coalesce in front of him.

"Who are you?" he asked the dust.

---

"The Tower? That's not possible. You couldn't...It must have been some kind of vision." Roland shook his head.

Rachel leaned towards him. "I know what I saw," she said desperately. "And felt. I was in the hospital. The doctors said I hadn't been responding, like I had been dead or something."

Roland held out a hand to stop her. And then Rachel heard something. Footsteps. Her door opened.

"Everyone alright in here?" Allie asked.

"We're fine," Roland responded.

Allie gave a nod. "Good. I have some eggs cooking if either of you are interested?"

Rachel's mouth fell open. Eggs! Real food. She didn't notice Roland smile next to her.

"We'll be right down," he told Allie.

Allie left.

Roland leaned in close to Rachel. His breath was a tickle against her ear, his voice a whisper.

"Don't talk about the Tower. Not to anyone. Not even to me. If Walter hasn't seen it in your mind yet, then he can't use it against you."

She glanced up at him sideways. "Roman knows," she whispered back.

Roland sighed. "Then let's hope doesn't decide to go blabbing about it. We don't know if he's powerful enough to block Walter from his mind."

Rachel furrowed her brow. How *had* Walter known all those things about her? He even knew Pennywise's pet name for her.

She took a shaky breath. "I think he already might have."

Roland leaned backwards. "What?"

"Walter knew things about me. Things that only Pennywise should have known."

*He even knew about my bloodlust*, she thought. Of course there was no way in hell that she was going to tell Roland that.

Roland started nodding. He scratched at his chin with his thumb. "Then I guess we'll just have to wait. See what happens."

Rachel sagged. "What else is new?" she mumbled.

Roland patted her on the shoulder. "Do you feel up to eating



something?"

"I'm just ready to get out of this bed."

"How's your fever?" Roland placed his hand on her forehead. "Not too bad."

*He keeps touching me all of a sudden*, Rachel thought. *I wonder what's up with that.* Oddly enough though, it didn't make her feel uncomfortable.

"Do you need anything?"

*To have a normal life.* She smiled up at him sweetly. "Just food for now."

"Do you...need me to...?" He pointed towards the door.

"Oh. I don't have any..." Rachel hadn't thought of that. Her shirt and shorts were gone. "I don't have any clothes to wear."

Roland looked at her funny. "What? I meant did you want me to bring you your food."

"Oh." Rachel let out a nervous laugh. "I thought you meant did I need you to leave so that I could get dressed." She rested her hand against her cheek and started to blush. "Sorry."

Roland gave her a brief smile. That was a first. "Nothing to be sorry about. And you do have clothes." He went to the chest at the foot of her bed. "Allie brought you a couple of her dresses and Roman bought you some at the clothing shop."

Rachel frowned. Roman had gotten her clothes. And then he had left. Why hadn't he waited until she woke up? Unless it was urgent.

Like needing to feed urgent.

Rachel pulled back her covers. She needed to get up. This was no place for her right now. She got out of bed and took a couple of steps, but immediately began to feel lightheaded. She closed her eyes.

"Whoa. Easy."

Roland was right at her side. Rachel sat back down.

"I must have stood too fast."

"You have lost a lot of blood."

She felt his hand on her shoulder. Blood. This was how this whole incident had started. By drinking Walter's blood. Was that what had made her lose Eleanor? Rachel leaned forward and put her face in her hands. This whole situation was beyond horrible. She just wanted to get away from it all. Or at least to take a break.

"Do you want me to get the doctor again?"

Rachel shook her head. Weak. She had been so weak. Weak to Pennywise's charms. Weak to Walter's tricks. And too weak to save her own child.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"For what?"

Rachel removed her hands. "For getting you into this."

Roland crouched down in front of her. "I have been in this for longer than you can imagine. If anything...you are a reminder."

Rachel folded her arms across her midsection. "For what?"

Roland smiled at her. "For what I'm fighting for."

Rachel gave him a smile in return. It was a weak one. But it was there.

---

"No I do not want to send anyone after the girl just yet. My powers are just now starting to take root inside her."

"And you want to wait until she becomes more powerful?"

Walter stopped walking and put his hands on his hips. Sayre

continued.

"Forgive me, sire, but if she already has her demon mate's powers and should she chose to join with the gunslinger, that would mean more power against us."

Walter turned to face Sayre with a grin. "And *that* is why I want to wait."

"You wish to continue your seduction of her? Try to convince her to join with us?"

Walter gave a nod. "That is the plan."

"And what of her Shine? You said it is weak, but if you have combined your powers with the demon's-"

Walter held his hand up, palm forward. "I am *not* putting her in the machine. And I would highly advise you to not bring that up again."

But the vampire wasn't done yet. "Sire...forgive me...but you almost sound like you are beginning to have feelings for this girl."

If it had been anyone else, Walter would have killed them on the spot for their insolence. But Richard Sayre was one of his right hand men, if a man was what you could call a can-toi.

"The only thing I want to feel is her body writhing underneath mine as she screams my name."

Sayre shifted his stance. Walter smirked at him, glad that he had made the vampire uncomfortable.

"And what of the gunslinger?"

Walter's grin widened. "First I'm going to spill his blood. And then... being the gentleman I am ...I'm going to let *her* drink it."

---

Roland sat heavily in the kitchen chair. Allie glanced behind her then went back to flipping eggs.

"You look like hell worked over."

"Feel like it." Roland took off his guns and placed them on the table next to him.

"When was the last you slept?"

"Couple of nights ago."

"Maybe you can get some rest after you eat."

"Maybe. I hate to leave her alone."

Allie took a plate out of a cabinet to put the eggs on. "Where'd her husband go?"

Roland leaned forward and rested his arms on the table, his hands laced together. "I don't know. He said he had something to take care of."

"Humph. Figures. Wife loses the baby. Husband takes off."

"Maybe."

Roland hoped that wasn't the case. But he highly doubted that it was. The clown was way too protective of his wife. Possessive even.

"Roland?" he heard a voice call out.

"In here," Allie called.

Roland saw someone out of the corner of his eye in the doorway. He had to do a double take.

She didn't even look like the same girl. Her long chestnut hair hung loose. She wore a long sleeved dark red blouse that contrasted well with her amber eyes. The shirt was tucked into black trousers. They would get dirty fast. Apparently Roman was thinking more of style than practicality. Her dirty, strange looking grey shoes poked out from underneath them.

She idly twirled a strand of hair. "He didn't get me any new shoes."

Allie finally turned. She raised an eyebrow at the younger girl. "Oh. Well don't you clean up nice and pretty?"

Rachel furrowed her brow at the hint of bitterness in the bartender's compliment. So Rachel was younger, prettier, could have her pick of men (as morally challenged as they were). But hadn't Allie just witnessed Rachel lose her baby just this morning?

Or maybe it was just Rachel's illness talking and Allie was just miffed that her clothes hadn't been good enough for Rachel. She made a mental note to thank the bartender later on. Rachel pulled up the chair at the end of the table next to Roland. She rubbed her arms together.

"Are you cold?"

Rachel gave Roland a small smile. "A little." She brought up her arm and coughed onto the sleeve.

"I had an aunt that died of that." Allie set a plate of eggs and fried bread down in front of Rachel.

Rachel smiled at her shyly, surprised Allie had served her before Roland. "Thank you."

She went to pick up her fork and stopped. She would actually be able to eat now without morning sickness kicking her in the ass. She took a deep breath. She couldn't let herself think about that right now. She had to be strong. For Roland. And for Eleanor.

Allie fixed a plate for Roland and herself. The three of them ate in companionable silence. They were halfway through the meal when Rachel started to fill agitated. Really agitated. And angry. She clenched her fork in her fist. Why would her mood have suddenly changed that fast?

"Rachel?"

She glanced over at Roland. He was watching her with a concerned look on his face.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ahh!"

Rachel grabbed her left upper arm as an intense pain shot through it. Two seconds later a gunshot sounded in the distance. And then another. The emotions. The pain. There was only one thing it could mean.

Pennywise was hunting in Tull.

And apparently it wasn't going well for him. Rachel shot Roland a look of horror. He grabbed his guns off the table and stood.

"Wait here."

Rachel's mouth fell open. Roland was going to shoot Pennywise. She had to warn him. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

*Pennywise! Whatever you're doing, you need to get your ass out of here now! Roland's coming!*

(((O)))

Walter sat tossing the black orb back and forth between his hands like a baseball. What was she doing right now? Was she with the gunslinger or the clown? Had she finally discarded her grey dress? And did she get it off by herself or did she have help?

Walter grit his teeth. He hated what this girl was doing to him. He went to place the orb back in its box. He could watch her some other time. Or better yet, pay her another visit.

He felt a tingle in the back of his mind. She was using her Shine. Right now.

And he could feel it.

Walter grinned like an evil Cheshire cat. The link between him and the girl was strengthening. Now all he had to do was ingest her blood and his bond with her would overpower the demon's.

And then she would be his.

(((((O))))))

Rachel's heart thumped wildly.

It's not that she was afraid for Pennywise. Really she wasn't. But she herself had almost been on death's doorstep due to injuries that Pennywise was receiving at the time.

Being mated to a demon could be a total bitch sometimes.

Rachel was hot on Roland's heels. Her arm pained her with every movement. Roland stopped when he got outside.

"Sounded like it was coming from straight ahead," he said.

"Wait for the screams. They always come."

Rachel hated how calm she sounded. Hated how numb she had become to all this. Sure enough, Pennywise didn't disappoint.

"A demon! Ma son almost got et by a demon!"

Rachel's heart almost stopped at the man's cry. He just had to use the d-word. And of course Roland heard it too. He ran off in the direction the man's shout had come from.

"There goes the neighborhood," Rachel said out loud to herself. She took off after Roland down a side street. Several houses down, a man came out clutching a young boy to his chest. The kid was crying. Rachel stopped. He looked like Georgie, with light brown hair and brown eyes. Rachel put her hand over her mouth and looked away. She couldn't deal with this right now.

Why? Why did he have to do this? And in the aftermath of losing his own daughter, no less. Did he really need to feed that badly, or had he done this out of anger?

Rachel started walking back to the main drag. She heard Roland speaking to the man, but didn't bother to pay attention. She didn't want to know what had happened. Roland would have questions. She was surprised he hadn't asked them yet. Her arm throbbed. She would have to look at it when she got back to her room. She wrapped

her arms around herself as she walked slowly. Did she really want to go back to the saloon? She sure as hell wasn't going back to the barn. There was a chair sitting in front of the saloon. She walked over and sat herself in it. She just as soon wait for the gunslinger outside. At least she could get some fresh air.

Pennywise still hadn't answered. She hated this. Why couldn't she have fallen in love with someone normal? Someone who didn't feed on fear and kids? She let out a weary sigh. She was so tired. Tired of being stuck in this interdimensional power struggle.

She saw Roland walking back. Yes there would be questions. And she would answer them. He deserved to know the truth about the woman he seemed so keen on protecting.

And the reason why she had ended up by his side to begin with.

A little gust of wind came through and Rachel shivered. She wanted to finish her breakfast so that she could get under the covers.

"Is he alright?" she asked Roland when he finally walked up.

"He's fine. Just scared."

"I bet. Most children are scared of him."

"And you're not?"

She regarded Roland with a cool expression. "I try not to be. He's always been gentle with me."

Except for one time. Rachel remembered it now. Pennywise's teeth sinking into her shoulder. That was the day he had made her float. The day he had made her drink his blood.

Just like Walter had. Rachel shook her head and closed her eyes.

"This is the second time he's gone after someone."

Rachel sighed. "I know. I don't know why though. He was so content back at home."



"Do you think he's doing it to retaliate?"

Rachel glanced up at Roland. "You mean because he can't get at Walter?"

Roland crouched down next to her. "I'm just trying to understand. Why go after a child? Or attack anyone for that matter?"

Rachel glanced around at the little bit of people walking the street. It was a bright sunny day. She and Roland were in a nice shady spot.

"Do we have to talk about this now?"

"No. We don't. But whatever it is, you don't have to go through it alone."

Rachel leaned forward in her seat. Roland was so sweet. She didn't deserve his friendship.

"I'm afraid of what you'll think of me. I know last night wasn't my fault...but you don't know..." She turned away from him.

Roland put his hand on her knee. "I don't judge people based on the actions of others. Whatever Pennywise has done to you...you're a remarkable woman, Rachel. You're kind. And good. There is nothing that would make me think less of you."

She glanced up at him from under her eyelashes. He said that now.

Roland patted her knee. "Come on. Let's go finish breakfast."

They both stood.

Roland put his hand on her shoulder, his dark brown eyes staring straight into hers. "I believe in you. Don't ever forget that."

He put his arms around her and pulled her once again into his embrace. Rachel hugged him back. He was so warm. So solid and steadfast. And she really did trust him, even cared for him as a friend. And apparently he felt the same about her.

She just hoped and prayed that that wouldn't change after he heard

her tale. The tale of the child eating monster.

And the woman who had sold her soul for his love.

## 10. Chapter 10

Rachel stared at the grey dress as if it were about to come alive and jump at her and start choking her. She was almost surprised that it hadn't turned back into ash now that it was off her body. *How appropriate. I'm still the girl who sits among ashes.*

"I can get rid of that if you'd like," Roland said.

"He'll probably just make another one," Rachel said ruefully. She sat on the chest and started to remove her tennis shoes. She had no plans to leave her room again anytime soon.

"So that was his doing."

Rachel nodded.

"Did he...do anything else?"

Rachel's stomach flip flopped. She removed her left sneaker, thinking of Walter's hands lifting her dress. Where would they have gone next?

And why did it even matter?

"He didn't...do anything."

She glanced up at Roland. His face fell into a frown.

He could tell she was lying.

"Rachel..." Roland sighed and put his hands on his hips.

She slowly lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "He just kissed me," she said in a small voice.

Roland crouched down again. "Against your will."

Rachel turned her attention back to her feet. She idly played with one of her shoe laces.

"Did he...touch you? Put his hands on you?"

She quickly started untying her other shoe. "Just my back." She took it off and stood. "I don't want to talk about this."

"You don't have to protect him."

Rachel whirled around. "Who the hell says I'm protecting him? You think I asked for this? I have *never* been so afraid to go to sleep in my life. He turned my..." she grabbed her dress off her bed and then shoved it towards Roland. "He turned my clothes into ash. With a touch. And then they turned into this. He *transformed* my clothes through a *dream*!" She threw the dress back on the bed. "What the hell kind of magic does that take, Roland?"

She crossed her arms across her chest and turned her back to him.

"Nothing good," came his response. "I worry for you."

"Well you don't have to be," she said tersely.

"But I do." His voice was right behind her now. "I don't know how to protect you from this."

She frowned. "That shouldn't have to be your job."

She felt his hand on her shoulder and turned to face him.

"But it is. I can't explain it, but I know you came to me for a reason." He dropped his hand.

Rachel nodded. "I feel the same. Like this all wasn't an accident."

"I know I asked you not to speak of this, but how much do you know about the Tower?"

Rachel shrugged. "Not much. I just know what you and Maturin have told me. That it protects the universe."

"You spoke to Maturin?" His voice was a whisper.

Rachel nodded. "I've seen him a couple of times. Once in the Tower. And before that when-"

Roland cocked his head sideways at her. "When what?"

Rachel took a deep breath. It was now or never. "While Pennywise was binding me to him. When he made me imprint on him."

Roland swiped a hand over his face. "You saw...one of the guardians of the Tower...while Pennywise was..." Roland stared at Rachel, his face a look of total awe and confusion. "What in the hell is he, Rachel? Please don't..."

Roland turned away from her. He steepled his fingers together in front of his chin. Rachel was starting to feel nervous. He was so close to figuring it out. She sat on her bed. Roland pointed towards the front of the building.

"That man whose son was attacked. He called Pennywise a..."

Rachel tucked in her bottom lip. Her palms were starting to sweat. So close. She was so close to finding out if she was about to lose the little bit of security she had in this world.

"You were carrying his offspring. You were carrying a demon's offspring."

Rachel inwardly cringed. She had never thought of it like that before. She had always seen Eleanor as a sweet, innocent child.

Roland's hands were clenched into fists. His attention was back on Rachel again, staring at her as though he had never seen her before. She had been afraid of this. His image of her had totally changed. If she could just shrink and crawl away, into a hole somewhere. Ha! Just like Pennywise had tried to do. Maybe they *were* perfect for each other.

Roland was back down in front of her again. Sheesh, why did he have to keep doing to that? Roman had never even done that. Not unless it was to go down on her. He had always stood tall and above, ever Mr. Large and In Charge. Not Roland. He didn't have a problem being down on her level. It just made her feel twice as guilty about what she was about to have to confirm.

"Rachel...you said he bound you to him. That's what it is, right? Why

you're with him? You don't actually... love him? Tell me you don't have feelings for him."

Rachel knew the look on her face had to have said it all, that it mirrored how she felt—lost, desperate...and painfully honest.

(((((O))))))

Walter hated the look on her face. Hated it. Just as much as he hated the compassion that was even now starting to slither its way into his dark heart. He lifted his hand towards the dust, for as little good as it would do. She would be able to hear him if he decided to try to speak to her. But feel him, not so much. If that was the case he would have used the orbs to kill the gunslinger a long time ago.

He was done keeping his distance. Done using illusions and dreams to get her attention. He would come to her for real this time.

And this time there would be no denying his presence.

(((((O))))))

"I've known Pennywise for almost four months now. But I just found out what he was a couple of weeks ago." She glanced down at her hands folded in her lap. "I wasn't happy about it either."

"But you've known he was different? That he wasn't human?"

She didn't meet his gaze. "Yes."

There was silence, as if Roland was letting what she was telling him sink in.

"You must think there's something wrong with me. That I'm crazy or something."

"That's not what I think."

She spread her hands out. "Then what? What else would you call it?" She placed her hands on her knees and leaned in towards him. "What else would you call a woman who purposely hooks up with a monster?"

She stood up and strode to the middle of her room.

"I would call you young. Naïve. But not crazy. And certainly not a bad person for it."

Ah, but he didn't know the whole story. Didn't know the thirst she fought to control. Or about Pennywise's tendencies, which were ten times worse than her lust for blood.

"I told you, I would never think less of you."

It was time. He needed to know the truth. To know what she really was.

"Can I see your knife, please?" she asked in a deadpan voice.

"What?"

"Your knife."

She turned to face him. His dark gaze searched her face, as if trying to read her intentions. He fished out his knife and handed it to her.

Rachel had small arms. She turned her left arm over and applied to the knife to the skin at a slant, just above the wrist. And she cut.

"Rachel!" Roland grabbed the knife from her.

Too late. She brought her arm up and closed her eyes. She inhaled.

Roland grabbed her arm. "Rachel, why did you do that?" His voice was scolding, but also laced with worry.

"To show you something."

She opened her eyes. Judging by the look of shock on Roland's face... her eyes were no longer amber.

"You wanted to know what Pennywise has done to me. This is what he's done to me. He tricked me into drinking his blood. And now when I smell it...I crave it."

Roland let go of her arm.

"I am a vampire, Roland. He made me a goddamn vampire. And you want to know what else?"

He didn't answer. She could only imagine the shock he was in right now.

"His blood isn't the only one I've drank. Last night in the barn...I drank his blood."

Roland's mouth fell open.

"I... drank... Walter's... blood."

---

Rachel sat at the short end of the bar, next to Allie who was frying a couple of hamburgers. Sheb was plonking away at the piano. They had a fairly busy crowd. Rachel glanced up from her glass of water and saw Roland sitting at the bar watching her. Their eyes met. The look on his face was one of sorrow, and something else she hadn't been expecting to see—acceptance.

She had expected him to freak out. Or try to hurt her. Something. But how he had reacted instead shocked her exponentially more.

*He stood there for the longest time looking at her. Finally he walked away. Rachel watched him. There was a wash basin with some towels next to it. Roland grabbed one. He came back to her and grabbed her arm. He lifted it.*

*His touch was so gentle as he wiped the blood that had begun to drip down her hand.*

*"Whatever you are...I know what you're not." He threw the towel aside and held her hand so tenderly in his. "You're not like Walter. Or Pennywise. And you may not believe it, but one day, I will make you see it."*

*He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.*

I will make you see it.

Those words still echoed in her mind. She finally broke his gaze.



Pennywise would be anything but pleased with how this day had played out next time he saw her.

But she found she no longer cared. Because once again he was not here. Roland was. She decided to turn in for the night. She downed the rest of her water then made for the stairs.

The lamp was on in her room. Allie had lit it for her before night fell. She had also let Rachel borrow one of her night gowns. Rachel was more than ready to crawl into it. She closed the door behind her and sat to take her shoes back off. She went to set them under the bed and jumped.

Someone was lying reclined in her bed.

And it wasn't Roman.

"Did you miss me?"

Rachel automatically started to back up to distance herself from the man who had made the past several hours a living nightmare.

"Please, don't stop undressing on my account," Walter drawled.

Rachel dropped her shoes. She ran for the door and tried to open it. It was locked. She pulled on the knob. Turned it. Nothing. She was locked in.

Locked in with the Man in Black.

In her bedroom.

"ROLAND!" She pounded on the door. "ROLAND!"

"He can't hear you."

"The fuck he can't!" She beat on the door again. "Roland! Can you hear me?"

Silence. He wasn't coming. No one was. She didn't even turn to face him. Couldn't. Like keeping her back to him would protect her.

"You know you can't stay there all night."

Rachel took a deep, shaky breath. "Don't fucking tell me what I can't do."

Her body warred with itself. She just wanted to fall asleep. She was beyond tired of feeling. Of being aware of just how fucked she really was. But sleep was out of the question now.

"You're in my bed," she shot at him.

"Yes I am," came his cocky remark. "Would you like to join me?"

"I want to goddamn sleep. Some people like to do that, you know."

She heard her mattress creak. "Yes I suppose last night was rough for you."

She finally turned around to him. "You think it was rough? You killed my *daughter*. My baby."

Walter finally stood. "An unfortunate loss for sure, my dear. But I believe in the long run you will find I did you a favor."

Rachel stared at him aghast. "A favor? By doing what exactly?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

"By freeing you from Pennywise and everything tied to him. Including his seed growing inside you. A seed that would have eventually destroyed you?"

Rachel's blood boiled. He had killed her baby on purpose. And what did he mean by freeing her? Was that why Pennywise hadn't answered her yesterday? But then why had she felt pain when he had been shot? So many questions and she was sick of not having the answers to them. But she didn't want them from him. She didn't want anything from him.

"Get out of my room. Unlock my door right now."

She turned her back on him and had taken two steps when she felt him grab her left arm. She whirled around.

"Do you really think blood is the only thing you desire? That you don't want Pennywise out of your life as well?"

Rachel tried to pull away. "Let go of me."

Walter pulled her sleeve up to reveal her bound arm. "Now, now. Did you really need to reveal our little secret like this?"

"I did *not* drink your blood on purpose," Rachel spat as she pulled some more. His grip was like iron.

He slowly unbound her dressings and tossed them aside. He ran his other hand up her arm.

"Such an unnecessary mark on such flawlessness. But it will heal."

Rachel stopped struggling and watched Walter stare at her cut like he had just gotten his hands on the holy grail.

What was so fascinating about the fact that she was bleeding? Did he not bleed himself? Or maybe it wasn't so much that she was bleeding, but what was in her blood.

He brought his mouth down to her cut and tenderly licked it.

Licked it! Like Pennywise had when her legs had been all cut up.

Rachel's body started to tense up. Why was Walter doing this? Was he a blood drinker himself? What were the odds? Something wasn't right about all this.

He kissed her wound. "There. Much better now."

Then to her surprise, he released her. Rachel just stood there, her anger somewhat deflated by her confusion.

She started toying with her sleeve. "You never told me why you're here."

Walter shrugged. "Maybe I missed you."

"Hmph. Miss me? I wish my husband would feel that way." She bent

to move her shoes out of the middle of the floor.

"I'm sure Pennywise has his reasons."

Rachel threw her shoes in the corner. "You didn't...do anything to him, did you?"

"Wouldn't you feel it if I had?"

Rachel raised an eyebrow. "Touché."

His arms behind his back, Walter slowly advanced on her. "Oh I'm sure he'll find you again eventually." He reached up and pushed her hair off her shoulder. "Not that I'm sure you care anymore."

Rachel sighed. She did care. She cared very much. She only wished Pennywise cared as much.

"I just want a normal relationship."

Walter's hands were in her hair again. "Now why would you want that?"

His voice was low. Rachel froze as his fingers grazed her neck.

"Such a special girl." His breath tickled her ear. Rachel tilted her head away from him.

Apparently that was what he wanted.

She felt his mouth on her earlobe. Rachel gasped loudly and jumped sideways just out of his reach.

"Well...I thought you liked my mouth on you, sweet thing."

"I don't want *any* part of you on me."

But her body was telling a different story as desire began to pool in her stomach.

Walter made a pouty face. "No? Well that's too bad. I was hoping you would at least let me tuck you in."

"Go fuck yourself!"

Walter smiled. "See now *that* is what I like about you." He started advancing on her again. "Ever the defiant one, even when your own destiny is staring you right in the face."

Rachel let out a shaky gasp as he stood right in front of her, almost touching her.

"One day you will beg for my touch."

Rachel slowly shook her head. "I will never willingly choose you."

His hand snuck up under hair again at the base of her neck. "Never say never."

Rachel was a quivering mess of fear as he bent down to kiss her lightly on the forehead.

Walter finally turned to leave. "Oh, and one other thing..." he said when he was almost to the door, "if you ever need me for...anything...even if it's to scratch an itch, and you know what kind I'm talking about...just reach out for me," He tapped a finger to his temple, "in here. And I'll be more than happy to oblige." He winked at her. "Sleep well, my dear."

He opened the door and walked out. Rachel collapsed on the chest at the foot of her bed. She put a hand over her mouth and rocked back and forth. He hadn't exactly forced himself on her this time, but in a way this was almost worse.

He had all but declared that she was his. And that he could get to her. Any time. And anywhere. But there was something else that bothered her exponentially more. Why did he drink her blood? Was he planning to do to her as Pennywise had done? And then another thought made her breath catch in her throat.

She had drunk his blood also. Did that mean she was bound to him too now? She had been thinking that she had it bad by being mated to Pennywise, a lowly demon.

But now it seemed that she was stuck with the Devil himself.

## 11. Chapter 11

She'd slept better than she thought she would. After Walter had left, she'd quickly changed into her night dress and then very reluctantly climbed into bed. Just the idea of sleeping in a bed that he had just vacated made her feel squeamish. But she had slept, that was the important thing, though it had taken her a while.

She made her way down the stairs. Roland was nowhere to be found. Allie neither. She finally found them both sitting outside, Allie on one of the chairs and Roland on the edge of the porch.

"Well look who's finally up." Roland gave her a smile when he saw her.

Rachel tilted her head at him. "Finally?"

"You missed breakfast," Allie said.

Rachel leaned against the steps railing. "It uh...took me a while to fall asleep."

"How are you feeling?" Roland asked.

Rachel nodded. "Pretty decent."

"Do your eyes change color?"

"Huh?" Allie's question had totally caught her off guard.

Allie squinted at Rachel. "Your eyes look darker."

"Uhhh..." Rachel cast a worried glance at Roland.

"They do look darker," he agreed.

Rachel ran back inside. She froze when she got to the bar and stared at her reflection in the large mirror behind it.

What stared at her was a girl she never thought she'd see again.

Her eyes were back to their natural dark brown.

A barrage of emotions assailed Rachel all at once. The main one was fear. Why were her eyes back to normal? Had something happened to Pennywise? And why hadn't she felt it either mentally or physically? The second, almost as strong emotion, was just plain confusion.

And the sad part was there was only one person she could ask about it.

She stared intently at the mirror as if it was Walter standing in front of her. "What have you done, Walter?" she asked the mirror.

Roland came up behind her from outside.

"Do I need to ask if something's wrong?"

Rachel gestured towards the mirror. "This used to be my natural eye color. Then after me and Pennywise imprinted, they turned that light golden brown." She placed her hands on the bar. "This worries me."

"You think something happened to him?"

Rachel shrugged. "I don't know. I can usually feel whatever he's feeling, at least when it comes to pain."

Roland's brow knit together. "You can feel when he's in pain? Why didn't you tell me?"

Rachel turned to face him. She crossed her arms and leaned back against the bar. "I don't know. I guess for the same reason I didn't tell you what he was. Fear."

"Of what?"

Rachel met his gaze. Her face fell. "That you would send me away."

"But you're not like him."

Rachel drew her mouth into a line. She felt like crying. Roland really was a good man. He deserved so much better than to be stuck with her. She walked up to him.

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am for you. Not only have you kept me alive, but you..." Rachel's lip started trembling. "You brought me back to life. And I will be so, so grateful...for the rest of my life."

She went to hug him and he put out his arms to embrace her. Rachel took a deep breath as she snuggled against him. A tear fell down her cheek.

"For as long as I have known you, all I have seen from you is stress and sadness," Roland said. "This needs to change."

Rachel sighed. "From your mouth to the universe's ear."

Roland rubbed her back. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Rachel sighed deeply. She felt so warm and safe, she didn't want to move. "How about a new mind and body," she grumbled.

Roland chuckled lightly. "I don't know about a new one, but there might be a bathing room here. Maybe you can take a nice bath. Relax."

Rachel's eyes grew wide. She was getting so used to being away from the comforts of her world that she hadn't even thought of that. She pulled away from him and looked up at him.

"They have running water here?"

Roland smiled at her and reached up to touch her temple. "I don't know about running, but they have to get their water somehow. Come on."

To her surprise, he grabbed her hand.

She didn't pull away.

---

Rachel stood naked looking at the bathtub full of water. Roland had worked tirelessly, going back and forth from the well behind the saloon and the washroom. He really was amazing. Maybe one day, if the universe didn't come to an end first, he would make an amazing husband for someone.



She climbed into the tub. The water was cool, but not uncomfortably so. She sank slowly into the water. It was almost to her knees. She had put her hair up in a messy bun as she hadn't been sure yet if she was going to wash it or not.

She sloshed some of the water over her arms and let out a content sigh. There was a little table next to the tub that held a bar of soap and some wash linens. She scrunched her face up as she lifted the soap. She decided to rinse it off in the tub first. She almost laughed at the fact that she was so worried about human germs after splashing around in grey water to get to her brother and cousin. Right away her smile turned back into a frown. What had become of Toby, Georgie and the Losers? Did they ever even make it out of Pennywise's lair? And what if her family? Did her mother now mourn her, thinking her dead? Rachel let out a deep sigh and let herself rest against the back of the tub. So many times this past week, she had asked herself these questions.

"You know you're not going to relax that way."

Rachel jumped a mile high at the unexpected voice behind her. She turned to the left and her mouth fell open in an 'o' shape. She quickly crunched herself up to cover herself.

"What are you doing here?!" she demanded.

Walter gave her an 'are you surprised?' expression. "You called me, didn't you?"

"No." Rachel said in a voice that came out more high pitched than she had meant to. "Get out."

"Are you sure? Because I could have sworn I heard you earlier this morning."

"Jesus Christ, Walter, that's not even possible. I can only call Pennywise."

"Can you?" He started to saunter towards her. "When was the last time you tried?"

Rachel turned to face forward again. She took a deep breath. *Stay*

*calm*, she told herself. *You can always holler for Roland.*

Except this time she was even more trapped. And even more, she was naked. She bent her knees some more and wrapped her arms around them, pressing her chest to her thighs. She jumped when she felt fingertips trail up her spine.

"You really shouldn't be here right now," she said in as calm of a voice as she could muster.

Walter walked away from her. "Oh? So I can come by some other time?"

Rachel scowled at his back. "I don't want you around at all."

He leaned back against the second tub next to her on the other side of the little table and crossed his arms.

"Well now, that can't be entirely true. How are you supposed to get answers to all your questions?"

Rachel let out heavy sigh. "This is lukewarm water. It will get cold soon.

He grinned at her. "I can warm it up."

She glanced up at him from under her lashes. Did he mean with himself or his magic? Either way she didn't want him coming near her again.

Rachel tucked in her lips. Okay. She could play along.

"You said last night I can reach out to you with my mind. How? The only psychic abilities I have is because of my link through Pennywise."

Walter shifted his stance. "Did you not drink my blood two nights ago?"

Rachel thought for a second. She had never considered that drinking his blood would have some kind of effect on her like it had with Pennywise.

She sat up straighter. "Oh God, you're not a demon are you?"

Walter chuckled. "No, ma'am. Just a man with a vision."

Rachel lifted the corner of her mouth and lowered her gaze at him. "And special abilities apparently. I know I locked that door before I got into this bath. And last night there was no way you could have gotten into my room without Roland seeing you."

He tilted his head back and gave her a lurid smile. "I have my ways."

Rachel had to stop herself from rolling her eyes, but she couldn't stop the blush that crept into her cheeks. Or the tingle that was starting to creep into her mound.

"I really do need to finish my bath."

Walter narrowed his lips and shrugged. "Suit yourself. I just thought we could chat and that I could help you relax."

Rachel gave curt laugh. "And how were you expecting to do that?"

"You seem awfully tense lately. I'm sure your muscles are awfully wound tight."

Rachel's whole body tensed up at that. Was he suggesting what she thought he was suggesting?

"You...want to give me a massage?"

He grinned at her again and gave a little nod. "That's right."

Rachel couldn't help it. Her fight or flight mode kicked in.

"You need to leave. Now."

"Are you seriously that afraid of me?"

"No. I seriously don't want you to *touch* me."

Walter scrunched his mouth sideways. "I'll make a deal with you. You let me give you a good, deep neck massage, and I'll leave you alone, unless..." he held a finger up, "*you* call on me."

*When hell freezes over*, Rachel spat at him in her mind.

Rachel felt like she was Odysseus stuck between Scylla and Charybdis. Did she trust Walter? Nope. But beggars couldn't be choosers as the saying went.

She gave him a single nod. "Alright. But *only* my neck and shoulders."

He nodded in return. "You got it."

Rachel faced back straight ahead. She swallowed, her heart pounding in her chest. Several seconds later she felt his hands on either side of her neck. She tensed up again. He lightly ran his hands down to the base of her neck and dug his fingers in. Rachel took a deep breath. It was just a massage. No need to freak out unless he started to get fresh. She closed her eyes and let her body sag.

"That's it," Walter said. "Just relax."

She would have to pay for this. Ohhh would she have to pay for this. People with this kind of power didn't do this kind of favor without some kind of payment attached to it. Plus to say that her husband would not be pleased would be a severely mild understatement.

But damn did this feel good. Deep massage indeed. Rachel almost flinched when he found a knot. Between the constant stress of the last couple of months and having to sleep on the ground the past week, she wasn't surprised.

She let out a deep sigh. Why the hell did she never ask Roman to do this for her? With his big hands and long fingers...

Walter moved down to her shoulders. "Feels nice, doesn't it?" he purred.

"Hm hmmm. Yes."

His hands moved to her back, and he started kneading. "You know if you were lying down, I could make it a full back massage."

Rachel's eyes popped open. This was getting way too deep. Walter was the enemy. He was literally trying to destroy the universe, for

God's sake. And he had killed her daughter. A daughter that she had never even had a chance to hold.

But he wasn't going to give up on her. That much she knew. And maybe if she played her own cards right, she could find out a few things about him. Maybe see if he had a weakness.

"Maybe next time."

Walter's hands stopped. "Oh?" He removed his hands completely and leaned in close to her. "You do realize you don't know what you're asking for, right?" he said in a quiet voice.

Rachel turned her head sideways towards him. "I've had worse."

He leaned in closer. His breath on her ear sent a chill down her spine...and it wasn't exactly one of fear this time.

"No, sweet girl...you haven't."

He planted a kiss on her cheek and then stood. Rachel sat with her mouth open, shaking. She heard the door open and close. Once he was gone, she sank father down into the tub. This was the second time now in less than twenty-four hours that Walter had come to her and left her a quivering mess.

What in the hell was happening to her life? This was going beyond jumping from the frying pan into the fire. She was on the edge of a volcano, about to jump into its active core.

She took a deep breath and tried focused on the coolness of the water, only there was one problem—it wasn't cool anymore. That sly, perverted bastard.

"Fuck," she mumbled out loud in a shaky voice.

Four things she was aware of now. 1) She didn't even find out what she needed to know. 2) She had unofficially made a date with a man that she had now determined was only one rung lower to the Devil on the evil ladder. 3) As he had spoken to her in her ear, his arm had snaked around her chest, his hand coming to rest with his thumb brushing the cusp of her breast.

And 4) She hadn't even flinched.

## 12. Chapter 12

"Maybe you should leave until you calm down."

Rachel had just opened the washroom door. She still had her hand on the knob when she faintly heard Roland talking to someone.

"Yeah you like when I'm gone, don't you?"

Rachel's eyes grew wide. Roman! He was back.

"I bet you like cozying up to her. Making her feel special about herself. Making her feel safe."

"She is special. But not because of you."

Wow. Two points for Roland.

"And you know so much about her, do you? What makes her happy? What makes her sad?"

That was Roman again.

"I do know what makes her sad. And *that* has very much to do with you."

Rachel flinched inwardly. Roland was really on a roll. She just hoped he didn't overstep it too much. She really hated for two of the people she cared about the most to get them all kicked out of the saloon due to their overinflated male egos. She really wished she would have caught the conversation from the beginning and she would have loved to listen in further, but knowing Roman's short fuse, this would not end well if she didn't show herself.

She took a deep breath and walked out to go meet them. Roman's eyes widened when he saw her face. She saw a muscle twitch in his jaw.

"You look good, kitten."

She gave him a small smile. Why was she feeling so nervous around

him? Her heart hammered in her chest. He took a couple of steps towards her.

"I've missed you."

"I've missed you," she answered in a small voice.

He lifted a hand to touch her wet hair. "Did you have a good bath?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath and tried to shield her thoughts as much as possible. It wasn't out of guilt. She had done nothing wrong. But Walter had still come to her. Still put his hands on her.

And she had given him permission.

"How's your fever?" Roman put the back of his hand against her forehead.

"It's gone."

"Good." He removed his hand. "You should probably get under the covers to let your hair dry. We don't want it to come back."

Rachel nodded. So he was ready to talk. But the question was...

Was she?

She threw a quick glance at Roland. The look of annoyance on the gunslinger's face was undeniable. She made her way up the stairs. Roman's heavy footsteps behind her made her feel like a small child whose parent was bringing them to their room to scold and spank.

It felt strange having just Roman in her room with her. Even Roland had spent more time with her there than he had.

It was time for some answers.

"Where were you?"

She turned to face him. His eyes were on her face again. She knew exactly what he was looking at.



"Your eyes."

"Yes. My eyes. Where were you?"

Roman raised his eyebrows at her retort.

"So what happened while I was away?"

He started walking around her room, looking around like he was looking for something in particular.

"I...slept. I ate. Me and Roland hung out. Roman...why won't you answer me?"

He glanced sideways at her. "I ate."

She squinted at him. "You ate? You mean Pennywise ate? That's why you were away? You tried to do it here, but you had to leave because you got shot?"

He whirled around. "Did you feel that?"

Rachel nodded. "Yes. It was in my arm." She lifted her arm. "It's better now, though."

Roman grabbed her arm. His gaze went to where her cut was. He must have seen it poking out of her sleeve. Her eyes widened as he pulled her sleeve back. The cut had already stopped bleeding and was starting to turn pink around the edges. Odd.

"What happened?"

Roman's voice was a mix of concern and demand.

"I uh...cut myself." Rachel pulled her arm back.

"On what? Why didn't I feel it?"

Rachel stared up at him in shock. "You didn't...I don't understand. I can feel when you get hurt. Shouldn't it be both ways?"

Roman's face was a scowl. "It should. And that's another thing. Your eyes. How long have they been like that?"

Rachel shifted her feet uneasily. "I just noticed them this morning."

"Do you feel any different?"

Rachel thought for a second. She had never really not felt different since the imprint. Not for the most part.

"I feel the same. Normal."

He pointed at her arm. "What happened to your arm?"

Rachel stared at her husband. He was the one who had left her just hours after she had lost their child, without any explanation.

"Why is this so important to you?"

Roman's face seemed to soften. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well I don't know. I mean...you just left." Rachel swept her arm sideways. "You didn't tell me where you were going. Not even Roland knew."

"Why would I tell him?"

Rachel scowled at the sharpness of his tone. She felt her chest tighten. Was he serious?

"Well...wouldn't you have wanted me to know? I was sleeping when you left. You could have at least told him so that he could tell me." She took a shaky breath. Roman had finally gotten back and this was the conversation they were having?

Roman sighed. "Kitten..." He lifted his arm and let it drop again. "I'm sorry. But you have to know I'm out of my territory here."

"And I'm not?" She crossed her arms. "You think I'm used to this heat? To this life? I have been living off beans and eggs. I just took a bath *today*. After a week. You don't have to bathe. You don't even have to eat. Not like I do."

"So..." Roland pursed his lips and shrugged, "what do you want me to do? Not ever see about myself?"

Rachel's heart sank like a stone. He really did not understand. She stared at him. Really stared at him. He had taken on this form to be with her. To make her feel as much as possible that she was in a normal relationship. To be her prince.

The prince would not have left.

She slowly walked up to him, her eyes on his the whole time.

"I never expected anything from you. Except for you to be there for me when I needed you the most. That is what a married couple does. That is what a *family* does, Roman. You didn't have to feed right then and there. You could have waited. Waited until I was back on my feet. Waited until my world..." She shook her head. Her eyes started to fill up. "Until my world didn't feel like it couldn't get any darker. Or until my heart didn't feel like it could break any more." Her voice broke. And the tears came.

Roman just stood there watching her, totally silent. So Rachel continued.

"I had just lost our child. I had just lost my baby, Roman." She brought her hand up to her mouth. She had to say it. Had to.

"And then you went try to take someone else's."

She couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand looking at him. Couldn't stand being in the same room as him.

So she fled.

Her tears blinded her as she ran down the stairs. She almost tripped when she got to the bottom, but caught herself. She quickly glanced up and saw Roland and Allie standing by the door talking. To her horror, they both turned. They must have heard her.

Rachel's eyes met Roland's. His face took on a look of concern. She felt like a trapped rabbit. She didn't want to talk to even him. She needed air. She needed space.

"Rachel?"

Rachel turned and ran. She would go out the back. By where the well was. She threw open the back door. The arid air felt like a furnace after being inside for so long. There was a building behind the saloon and another to her left. She didn't know if they were houses or what they were.

She had a split second decision to make before Roland found her. Should she go left, towards the barn? Or see what the rest of the town had to offer? She turned right. She was almost to the next house when she turned and glanced behind her. She saw Roland open the back door.

And she tripped.

She fell hard on her hands and knees. Rachel sank to the ground. She didn't even bother to see what she had tripped over. Her palms hurt. Her knees hurt. Fresh tears fell.

She was losing Roman. There was no way out of it. He hadn't even asked her how she was. Their link. Their stupid link. That was all that he had cared about. Her tears made imprints on the dirt. This was where she belonged. In the dirt. Maybe that was why she and Pennywise had worked so well together back in Derry. Because he had lived in the sewers.

She closed her eyes shut tightly and screamed. In her mind she screamed. Maybe if she focused hard enough Maturin would hear her. Or maybe Walter. Did it even matter anymore? She opened her eyes and glanced down. Several small rocks dotted the ground around her. Except they weren't on the ground anymore.

They were hovering just above it.

"Rachel."

The rocks fell. Roland was at her side. Had he seen what she had just seen?

"What happened? Are you alright?" His hand was on her bark. Roman would have a fit.

"He shouldn't see us like this," she said in a shaky voice.

"What happened? Did he do something?"

"Not yet, I haven't."

Roland whirled around. Rachel didn't even bother. She knew exactly who that voice had belonged to and she had zero desire to face him right now.

Roland stood. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't *do* anything. Not that it's any of your business, *gunslinger*."

"It's more my business than you think, demon."

*Fuck me!* Rachel screamed in her mind.

"She told you. Finally she told you," came Roman's deadpan voice.

"She didn't have to."

Rachel hoisted herself up. She couldn't stay out of this. She turned around.

"Roman, you have to stop this. Roland didn't do anything."

"But he doesn't try to stop it either. Or did you invite the sorcerer into your bedchamber while I was gone?"

Rachel's mouth fell open. It was as if Roman had just reached out and pulled her heart out of her chest.

"You think I would cheat on you?" She was so stunned, she could barely speak above a whisper. "You think I would *cheat* on you? With *him*? With the guy who used you to get to me?"

"You tell me."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Roman had shown severe jealousy before. But to treat her like this? She felt like her blood was boiling, which considering how hot it was outside, it probably wasn't far from it.

"He came into my ROOM! He locked my door! I screamed for Roland.

Screamed for him! Do you know what he did to me? Do you want to fucking know?"

She advanced on Roman, pulling the sleeve of her left arm up as she did so. She shoved her forearm in his face.

"He grabbed my goddamn arm, Roman. Grabbed it. And then you know what he did next? Before I could even stop him? He drank. My. Blood! He licked it off my arm like a goddamn cat! And where were you? Where *were* you, Roman?" She shook her head at him when he didn't answer. "And you dare to tell Roland of his shortcomings." She leaned in towards him and lowered her voice to a searing hiss. "He's. Not. My. *Husband*."

She glared at him. If her gaze could have burned him it would have.

"And you're not either."

She backed away from him. The look on Roman's face was undiscernible. Was he hurt? Angry? She was almost glad she couldn't feel his emotions anymore.

"You want to help me? Stop trying to shut everyone else out of my life. You may not need anyone else, but it doesn't mean that I don't."

She took a deep breath. Oddly enough, she felt relieved. She knew she had hurt Roman, but goddamn it, she was past sick to death of him either hurting or neglecting her and then finding someone else to put the blame on.

"I am going to go for a walk now. I need to think." She walked up to Roman. She started to bring her hand up to place it on his chest, but stopped. "I love you, Roman. I love Pennywise too. But I need to think about what's good for my peace of mind right now."

And then she left.

---

Rachel passed the brush through the horse's mane. The poor creature's hair was matted. The livery owner, Mr. Kennerly, had let her see about her mule and she asked if she could see to any other animals that were there as well.

"Don't worry, bud, we'll get out the knots."

She heard a knock and turned to see Allie standing there. The bartender had knocked on the stall doorway.

"Hey," Rachel greeted her.

Allie smiled. "I told Roland you would probably be here."

Rachel's heart leapt. Sheesh, why was it doing that? It was just Roland. "Oh?"

"He would have come himself, but he decided to give you a break."

Rachel furrowed her brow and cast a quick glance at Allie. "A break? From what?"

"From men."

Rachel slowed down with her brushing. "Oh?" she said again. She stopped brushing. The barn was silent for a minute. "I know what you must think of me."

Allie harrumphed. "Can't be any worse than me."

"But I'm not-" Rachel frowned at Allie. "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you the first night we were here. I can't imagine what it's like out here. Especially for a woman."

Allie shrugged. "It's a living. And I apologize for how I was to you. You can't help it if all these men are all over you. I've seen you. You don't exactly put yourself out there for them."

Rachel gave her a small smile. "Is Roman still there?"

"Nah. He done left."

Rachel nodded.

"You know he cares for you?"

Rachel lifted the corner of her mouth. "I know," she said in a small voice. "He just doesn't know how to show it sometimes."

Allie tilted her head sideways. "Are we even talking about the same man?"

Rachel's eyebrows knit together. "You're talking about Roman, aren't you?"

Allie shook her head with a chuckle. "Honey, pay attention next time he does something for you. The man's crazy as a coyote for you." She started to walk away. "You just need to open your eyes," she called as she got farther away.

Rachel came out of the stall, the brush still in her hand. "Who are you talking about?" she called back.

"Roland."

---

Roland was sitting on the steps of the saloon when she got back. Was he waiting for her? Rachel could have strangled herself. Why did she even care?

"Just a friend. He's just a friend," she mumbled to herself.

Then why was her heart rate starting to pick up?

She took a deep breath and let it out through her mouth. As she got closer, he seemed to notice her. He smiled. She smiled back. She got even closer. Allie was sitting in on of the chairs. The bartender stood and went back into the saloon. Rachel's smile fell. Of course Allie would leave her alone with him.

"Hey," she greeted Roland.

"Hey, yourself," he said in a friendly voice.

"Mind if I join you?"

Roland smiled again. "Of course."

Rachel sat on the step next to him, but still keeping a safe distance.

"How are your hands?" he asked her.



Rachel turned sideways and showed him her palms. They were all skinned up and a burned throbbled like crazy. Seeing about the animals in the barn had been no picnic.

Roland studied them. "We need to run some water on them. Clean them off. What about your knees?"

He glanced up at Rachel. She raised an eyebrow. Her legs were almost scaring her right now. It had been well over a week now since she had shaved. Plus there was just no way in hell she was letting Roland get that close to them. With her luck, that would be when she and Roman's link would decide to start working again.

"I can take care of it. Thanks."

"You sure?"

She gave him a coy smile. "I think I can handle a few scraped up appendages. Besides you didn't see me a few months ago. Someone pushed me down into a ravine. Not a rocky one, thank God. But still."

"A ravine?" Roland raised an eyebrow and shook his head. He sighed. "I think the universe is out to get you sometimes."

Rachel let out a gruff laugh. "Ha! Join the club."

"What does that mean?"

"What? Join the club?"

"Yes. I've heard you say that before."

"Uh..." Rachel had to think. There were so many saying that she had never really thought about before. "I think it just means you're in the same situation as someone."

Roland nodded. "Join the club," he said idly.

Rachel smiled. Maybe one day she and Roland could exchange stories about their worlds. They sat on the steps sharing a companionable silence until the regulars started showing up.

"I guess we'd better go inside," Roland said.

He and Rachel both stood. She brushed the dirt off her bottom and winced when it made her hands sting.

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you," Roland said.

"Okay."

"Last night..."

Rachel's hand froze in mid dusting. She slowly turned her head towards Roland. "What about it?"

He came closer to her. She slowly lowered her arm.

"What you told Roman earlier...did it happen last night?"

Rachel nodded. She swallowed.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?"

They moved onto the porch to let the patrons pass.

"No," she answered. "It wasn't."

"Did he...?"

Rachel quickly shook her head.

Roland nodded. He got right up close to her and leaned down towards her. "There's something I want to ask you and you can tell me no." He raised his eyebrows.

Rachel tucked in her bottom lip. "Okay."

"Would you...like me to stay with you tonight?"

Rachel opened her mouth but closed it again. A small group of laughing men passed. She didn't like how they were looking at her and Roland. Especially considering what they were discussing.

"Where will you sleep?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Don't worry about me. I can sleep on the floor."

Rachel felt put on the spot. She could think of one man who would not be pleased about this. And as for Walter...well he would still find her anyway if he wanted to. But either way, she sure as hell didn't want to be alone tonight.

"Deal. You can stay with me tonight."

Roland reached out and squeezed her shoulder then went inside. Rachel remembered what Allie had told her earlier in the barn. That Roland cared for her. And tonight he was going to share her room with her. And she would be wearing nothing but Allie's nightgown.

Nope. Nothing would be awkward about that at all.

---

Rachel shook like a leaf the entire time she was getting undressed. Why in the hell did she feel like a newlywed bride on her honeymoon? Roland was just going to sleep with her, not "sleep" with her.

She adjusted her loose fitting night gown and took a deep breath. She opened the door. Roland was standing there holding a pillow.

"Hey," she said.

"Hello."

Rachel could tell he was trying to keep his face neutral. She licked her dry lips. This was such a bad idea. On so many levels. Her heart pounded against her rib cage.

"Uh...come in." She swept her arm to the side. "Make yourself comfortable."

Roland came in.

"Do you uh...need anything before we settle down?" Rachel asked.

"No. You?"

"No," Rachel said in a squeaky voice. She cleared her throat. "I mean no. I'm fine." She gave him a smile.

Roland just stood there.

"I'm uh...I'm going to go to bed now." Rachel gestured towards her bed. She started nodding like an idiot.

Roland still stood there looking at her.

"Well, uh...goodnight."

"Goodnight," he responded.

Rachel pulled back her covers and climbed into bed, all too aware of how thin her nightgown was. She waited for Roland to get comfortable then blew out her lamp. She snuggled down into her covers and let out a deep sigh. There was a moment of silence.

"Let me know if you need anything," came Roland's voice in the dark.

Rachel took a shaky breath. "Thank you. Goodnight."

"Night."

---

Walter watched her in the blue orb dust again, standing in her loose night gown. His bulge throbbed mercilessly. To hell with Roland Deschain and his honor. If that would have been Walter, he would have pushed her back onto her bed, pulled down the bodice of her night gown, and latched onto one of her glorious breasts to suckle like a newborn babe.

But not tonight. He would have to take care of himself tonight.

So she didn't want to be by herself to sleep anymore. That was okay. After tonight, the Man in Black would take care of that.

He would take care of that quick, fast, and in a hurry.

***Author's Note:*** After much consideration, I think that I am going to put this story under the rated M category. I probably should

have done that with *Stroke of Midnight*, but Matthew McConaughey and Idris Elba are such older men, and even Rachel herself is much more mature on here. Plus there's probably going to be more violence as the story progresses. I just feel it would be safer.

Thank you so much to everyone who has been supporting my story so far! Appreciate all of you!

## 13. Chapter 13

Rachel opened her eyes. Her stomach roiled and gurgled. Pale sunlight shone through her window. She sat up. Roland was gone. Had he stayed with her through the night? She swung her feet out of bed. When she went to stand, her stomach gave a lurch. She sat back on the bed, placing her hand on her belly. That was odd. It must have been something she ate. But she, Roland and Allie had all been eating the same things. She stood up again. Fighting her sudden and mysterious nausea, she dressed. As she started to descend the stairs, she was hit with a sudden sense of vertigo. She grabbed the railing, her breaths coming out in gasps. Where had that come from all of a sudden? The vertigo passed and she tried again.

She heard the sound of sizzling as she made her way to the kitchen and smelled something that reminded her of hash browns. She only wished it was hash browns. But corn fritters worked well enough. The scene in the kitchen was just as it had been the last two mornings, Allie at the stove and Roland at the table. When Roland saw her, his usual neutral visage turned to one of concern.

"Rachel? Are you alright?" He stood.

Allie turned. "Oh dear," she said in a concerned tone. "Honey, are you feeling well?"

"I'm uh... I guess I'm okay."

Actually Rachel did not feel okay. Her stomach churned and when she would move her head, the room felt like it was tilting.

Roland pulled out a chair for her. "Here. Sit down."

Rachel sat heavily. She put her elbows on the table and her head in her hands.

"Hope you ain't comin' down with something," said Allie.

"Oh, God, I hope not."

Rachel heard a chair being moved close by. Roland must have moved

to sit closer to her.

"How long have you been up for?" he asked.

"Not long."

"And you've been feeling poorly the whole time? You do look kind of pale," said Allie.

"Uh huh." Rachel's stomach gave another lurch. She started rubbing it. "I am sooo nauseated."

"Hmm. Definitely not good," said Allie.

"Do you feel hungry?" Roland asked her.

"Roland, when on God's green earth has a woman ever been hungry and nauseated at the same time?" Allie said in a chiding voice. "Especially if she's-

Rachel held her breath. Tried to fight the bile that was threatening to rising in her throat. No. That wasn't possible. She had lost the baby. And Walter couldn't have... She was already pregnant for Pennywise when he...

She cast Allie a careful glance. "I lost my baby, Allie. You know that."

The two women stared at each other for a minute. Finally Allie gave her a small smile.

"You're right. It must be something else then." She went back to her corn fritters.

Rachel cast her gaze downwards. She could feel Roland watching her intently. What was the gunslinger thinking right now?

He stood. "I'll be right back." He left the kitchen.

---

Roland made his way to the washroom. Something was definitely ailing Rachel. Her skin was paler than usual. And she didn't seem like her usual self. She always carried herself so straight. Now she just

seemed to sag. He found a rag and made for the well. Maybe a cool rag on her face would help.

He let out a weary sight. He was so tired of seeing her like this. Every time he would think she was out of the clear, something else would happen. He just wanted to pull her tight against him, tuck her under his coat, and shield her from all of the pain and anguish that kept being thrown at her again and again.

He wet the rag good at the well, then went back inside. When he got back to the kitchen, Rachel was nowhere to be found, but he could hear the sounds of retching.

"She couldn't make it?"

Allie let out a noisy breath as she put some corn fritters on the plate. "Nope. If I didn't know better, I'd say that girl's got a bun in her oven."

Roland felt his chest tighten. Rachel had said Walter had been in her room. She said he didn't do anything, but what if...? Roland's jaw clenched. If he ever got his hands on Walter, the bastard would be lucky if all Roland did was strangle him. Or stab him. But no justice would be good enough. Not for Rachel. Or Roland's parents. Or his gunslinger brethren.

A side door to the kitchen opened. Rachel's face was green. Roland had to fight to not scoop her up and carry her upstairs into his own bedroom, tuck her into his bed, lock the door, and crawl in next to her. He just wanted to hold her. Wanted to protect her from the sick and twisted bastard that stalked her and even from her good for nothing excuse for a husband.

If he even really was her husband. He remembered what Rachel had told Roman behind the saloon yesterday. He would have to ask her about that.

But not right now. Right now Roland would do what he did best. He would take care of her.

And he would love her.



"I got you a wet rag."

Rachel wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve. She gave him a weary smile. "Thank you." She pulled up a chair on the other side of the one Roland had been sitting in.

He handed her the rag and she started wiping her face with it.

"Ugh. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"And you just started feeling like this?" Roland asked.

"Right when I woke up. But my stomach was already nauseated, like it had stared sometime during the night."

Roland drew his lips into a line. "Is there anything else bothering you, or just your stomach?"

"I caught a little dizzy spell as I was coming down the stairs and for a little bit after. But I think it's going away now."

Yes something was definitely not right with her.

"Allie cracked an egg into a skillet. "Why don't you go lay down? Roland, you can go with her. And I'll bring the two of you up some food in a little bit."

Allie gave Roland a sideways glance and raised an eyebrow at him. He scowled at her. What was Allie up to? She had been mentioning to Roland lately about how pretty Rachel was and how much she needed someone to care for her.

Of course Roland cared, more than he would admit to anyone, but that didn't mean he would act on it. Rachel was a married woman and not to mention half Roland's age. Plus he had his duty to think about—bringing about the demise of the man who had taken from Roland everyone that he ever cared about.

Rachel calmly folded up the rag and set it on the table to her right.

Not everyone, he reminded himself.

"That sounds like a nice idea," he agreed.

"Yeah it does," Allie said. She put one hand on her hip and turned her attention towards Rachel. "How about it? It's the Sabbath anyway. How about some breakfast in bed?"

Rachel cast an uneasy gaze back and forth between Allie and Roland. She wanted to go back to bed alright. But it would be to hide. She knew how childish it was to think that, but she really didn't want to have to face the world anymore.

"I...can go lay down," she said slowly. "By...myself."

She cast a sheepish glance at Roland. He just stared at her, his face neutral.

*Goddamn it, just say something*, Rachel thought.

"Alright. Do you at least want me to walk you up?" he asked.

Damnit.

"Alright," she said.

Roland followed her upstairs. They stopped at her door.

"Allie said there's a church service in town. I would ask you if you wanted to come, but-"

"Walter didn't have sex with me again."

Roland tilted his head back.

"I don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm not pregnant. He didn't...put his hands on me that way."

She crossed her arms over her chest. She really wished she knew the extent of Roland's feelings towards her. Not that it would make any difference. She did care about him as a friend and maybe she was a little bit attracted to him, she finally had to admit to herself, but that was it.

"I believe you," he told her. "And I truly hope you feel better soon. If you need anything, just ask Allie. I'll be back soon."

He lifted his hand as if to embrace her, but dropped it. He turned and left. Rachel's heart dropped. Roland really was doing his best. She wanted to call after him, but stopped herself.

She went back under the covers. Her nausea had mostly subsided since she had thrown up. Maybe it was just something she had eaten that just hadn't agreed with her. She laid on her side facing the window. She wondered how many of the towns people went to church. Maybe she could go to the barn again after breakfast.

Allie finally came up. Rachel ate, but not much. Just a fried egg and a corn fritter. She didn't want to overdo it. After she was done, she decided to go for a walk. The town was dead. A stillness hung over the air. Normally that would have freaked her out, but today it was a comfort. She could have all the space she needed.

She found her mule, Billy, she had decided to name him. She put some grain in his stall. When she came out, she stopped in her tracks. Three men stood before her. They were all dressed in silky, loose-fitting black shirts and black trousers. And they all wore the same expression that bordered between neutral and a scowl. Either they all worked for someone very important or they were about to be going clubbing.

Rachel cleared her throat. "Can I help you boys with something?"

The guy closest to her, who was not much taller than her, and lean with short dark hair and intense dark eyes, said in a deadpan voice, "Our boss sent us to check on something. We do not wish to hurt you."

Rachel could have laughed. This was like a scene from a low budget action movie.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Well then, by all means, don't let me stand in your way," she said tartly.

"You are the way," he answered in a placid voice.

Before Rachel could ask what he meant, a dark hood was thrown over her head. She started to struggle, but strong arms grabbed her from behind her.

"Grab her legs," someone hollered.

Holy shit! They were kidnapping her. And Rachel had a feeling it wasn't to bring her to some tranquil cabin in the woods for a nice little chat like Chris had done. Sure enough, someone went for her legs next. She tried to kick out, but whoever had her was smart. They grabbed her legs from the side. All she could do was squirm. She was not letting this happen again. She closed her eyes and threw her mind outward in a screech.

*ROLAND! PENNYWISE! HELP! I'M BEING KIDNAPPED! SOMEONE, PLEASE!*

She felt the hem of her shirt being lifted to expose her belly.

"No!"

She tried to jerk away, but it was like her body was stuck in a steel grip. She cried out when she felt a small jab in the right side of her abdomen followed quickly by a stinging sensation. No one moved or spoke. She couldn't see at all what was happening to her.

(((O)))

Walter felt her fear as if it was his own. He hated it. But it was necessary. And when she used her Shine it lit up like a bright star in his mind. She was getting stronger. Soon he would find out just how strong. And how much closer she was to completely becoming his.

He closed his eyes and smiled.

(((O)))

"You know this isn't smart right? If you know who I am, then you know who I am mated to and what he is. He will find you."

No one answered. The stinging sensation lasted for several more seconds, and then the pressure on her abdomen was withdrawn.

"We have it. Let her go."

All at once, all hands on Rachel fell away. She staggered.

"Let's move out!"

She heard retreating footsteps. With a shaky hand, she removed the hood from over her head. Her assailants were gone. Her abdomen burned and stung. She lifted her shirt. There was a red spot where the jabbing feeling had been. Had she been stuck with something? And if she was, had something been injected into her or taken out? And what was the purpose for the hood? Rachel started shaking. She took several steps towards the front of the barn. She was almost there when another wave of dizziness hit her. She started seeing red. Rachel plopped herself heavily on the ground in the doorway. She swayed sideways. She closed her eyes. Roland would find her. She placed her hand on her belly as an uneasy feeling started to settle in it again. She let her head fall back against the aged wood and tried to focus her breathing.

Seriously?! How many times in the past couple of months had she ended up passing out, throwing up, or both? At least Roman had been there for her all those times. Would he ever be there again? Or had he finally given up on her? Maybe he had thought she had given up on him.

Her world went dark.

---

*Rachel.*

Someone was shaking her.

*Rachel.*

"Ummm."

More shaking.

"Rachel, wake up."

She stared upward. She was laying on the floor just inside the barn.

Roland was right over her, his hand on her shoulder.

"Are you alright?"

Rachel hoisted herself up into a seating position. She must have passed out again. She had been doing that way too easily lately. Like her body was trying to go into hibernation any time something crazy happened. Maybe if she ever got back to Derry, one day her theatre group would decide to do *Sleeping Beauty*. Ha. That would be an easy role to nab.

"I uh...a group of men attacked me. One of them put some kind of hood over my head and another one did this." She lifted her shirt to show him the red dot. A small bruise was already starting to form around it. "I think they stuck me with something. But I couldn't see."

"Stuck you with something? Like what?"

"I don't know. I just know it stung."

"Did you see where they went?"

She shook her head.

"Can you stand?"

Roland held out his arm. She grabbed onto it and used it to steady herself as she stood. He put his other arm around her back. Rachel cast a worried glance around. They were alone.

"There's no one out there," Roland said. "Did they say anything? The men who did this to you?"

Rachel told everything. As her story progressed, she noticed Roland tighten his grip on her.

"And then one of them said 'We have it. Let her go.' And then they left."

"We have it?"

Rachel nodded.

"That doesn't sound good. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

Roland released his hold on her, but kept his arm around her as he led her away from the barn. The sun was nearing its zenith.

"The one with the dark hair said you were the way," Roland asked.

"Yes. I wish he knew what they meant. The whole situation scares me."

Roland squeezed her shoulder. "We're gonna get you back to your room. I'll have Allie keep the place locked up. I have a feeling she's not going to get much business anyway."

"So how was the service?"

"What you would expect. Fire and brimstone. I left early though. For obvious reasons."

Rachel shot him a hopeful glance. He had heard her. He had actually heard her. She didn't really think he would have. But it had worked.

Her heart leapt. Maybe Pennywise had heard her and would show up too.

Just maybe.

It did not take much to convince Allie to keep the saloon locked up. As soon as Roland told her of Rachel's attack, Allie locked the doors back behind them.

"Sister, you do not have good luck with that barn."

Rachel only halfway heard her. The spot on her stomach where that man had injected her at burned and throbbed. Roland must have noticed her vacant look. She felt his hand squeeze her shoulder again.

"Let me go check your room and you can go up."

Rachel sat down at one of the tables. She would hear the wind

howling outside.

"Sounds like a storm coming," Allie idly remarked.

Rachel sighed. That was just what they needed. To have their hard pan dirt turn to mud. But maybe it should rain. It would be a nice change from the dry relentless heat.

Several minutes later, Roland returned and announced that the rest of the building looked secure. Rachel didn't say anything but she really didn't believe that mattered. Not when you were dealing with men who could just appear out of nowhere.

Roland followed her to her room. She was so tired of feeling like a hospital patient. Her window was rattling from the gusting wind outside.

She sighed. "I guess I'll lay down. Again."

"I know. But rest is good. Especially after all you've been through."

Rachel's heart leapt as an idea came to her. Maybe she wouldn't have to rest alone.

"Hey, Roland, I want to ask you something. And you can say no if you want."

She turned to face him. The look on his face said he was ready. Ready for anything she had to throw at him. Or for anything she had to offer him. She didn't know if that was good or bad. She guessed it was time to find out.

"Can you...lay down with me. Next to me."

Roland raised an eyebrow.

"I just don't want to feel alone right now."

Roland swallowed. Was this really a good idea?

"If that's what you want."



Rachel's stomach flip flopped. This was the moment where things had started to heat up between her and Pennywise. He had spent the night with her in her bed. Of course they hadn't had sex, but there had been other things. She pushed the memory of that night from her mind. The last thing she needed right now was to remember Pennywise's fingers pumping in and out of her, his bells jingling on his wrists.

Rachel sat to remove her shoes. Nope. None of that would take place today. She pulled back the covers and climbed in, scooting over to give Roland some room. She laid on her side, facing him. He took off his coat and to her surprise, his guns, and set them on the chair. He didn't remove his boots. He climbed in bed next to her on top of the sheets and laid on his back, his hands laced together across his chest. She wondered if this was as awkward for him as it was for her. Neither of them spoke.

And the wind continued to howl.

---

Walter was pacing in his study when Sayre arrived. The vampire held a small, heart shaped vile in his hand.

"I have what you have been waiting for, Sire."

"Good. Now drink it," Walter commanded.

Sayre opened it and took a small swig. He closed his eyes. Walter waited.

"A strong hama-demon, sire. Your powers have almost completely eclipsed that of her mate's. She will make a fine queen."

Walter's heart almost quivered in his chest from the excitement. "Excellent."

Sayre's eyes opened. Walter scowled at the look of worry on the vampire's face.

"What?"

"There is...something else, sire."

Walter put his hands on his hips. "Then what? What is it? Tell me."

"The girl...is with child."

---

*Bang!*

Roland's eyes popped open and his head shot up. Rachel's door had been thrown open. Sheb the piano player was standing there. He had a crazed look in his eyes and a knife in his hand.

"Ahh. The Interloper and his demon whore. How appropriate."

Rachel was sleeping snuggled against Roland's side with her hand on his chest. He was surprised she hadn't awoken. She wouldn't have a choice now.

Roland rolled out from underneath her. With an inhuman yell, Sheb came at him with his knife raised. Roland went to the right just as Sheb stabbed downward. The knife barely missed Roland's arm. The larger man grabbed Sheb's right forearm with his right hand. Sheb couldn't move his arm. Roland had to work to grab the knife from the little man's grip, but he got it and threw it aside. Roland punched the piano player in the gut, causing the little man to double over.

It was over just as fast as it had started. Roland grabbed Sheb by the collar. He turned his gaze towards the bed. Rachel was sitting up awake. He knew the look of terror on her eyes would haunt him for many days to come.

---

Walter stared at Sayre as if the vampire had just told him that all twelve Guardians of the Tower were about to descend upon them.

"What do you mean 'with child'? That is not possible. I killed it."

"Blood does not lie, sire."

"Well then, there must be some explanation. Pennywise must have lain with her."

He started to pace again. Rachel was pregnant. There was no way in

this universe that that was possible.

"You would have known if he had, sire," Sayre continued. "Just as you would have known if she had lain with the gunslinger."

Walter hated when the vampire was right. But something wasn't adding up. She had lost the demon clown's seed after he had taken her in the barn. That meant it would have flushed out any sperm that he had just injected into her as well. Unless...

It wasn't completely impossible. Walter was practically a demon himself, being a cousin to the Crimson King. But one thing was certain—his new paramour was pregnant.

And Walter, it seemed...was the father.

---

Rain lashed at the windows. Thunder rumbled and lightning streaked across the sky. Roland poked his head back into Rachel's room again. It was well after midnight. And she was still sitting up. He saw her head fall, but she sat up straight again. Roland shook his head.

After the incident with Sheb, Rachel just kind of went into herself. She wouldn't speak. She didn't even want to eat. Roland took a deep breath and tried to keep himself in check.

What if this was it for her? What if this newest attack, an attack that Roland had tried over and over to assure her was because of him this time, was finally too much for her?

He heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. To both his surprise and severe annoyance, it was Roman. The young man wasn't even wet.

Not a man, he had to remind himself.

"What are you doing out here?" Roman demanded.

"She's not sleeping."

"Is she in her room?" Roman turned his gaze in that direction. He started to go there, but Roland blocked his way.

"Wait. There's something you need to know."

Roland told Roman about what had happened in the barn. Roman's face slowly turned to one of worry to one of murder.

"And one of them stuck her in the belly with something?"

"That's what she said."

"And then someone else came in this afternoon? Someone after you?"

"That's right."

Roman's eyes fell to Rachel sitting on her bed. "I know how to pull her out of this. Get her to sleep. But you're not gonna like it."

Roland hated Roman with every breath in his body. But hate would not pull the woman he cared so desperately about out of the stupor she had fallen into.

"Do what you must," he finally consented.

"Wait here." Roman strode past him and went, to Roland's surprise, into Roland's bedroom.

Roland inhaled deeply. And he waited. Finally Roman emerged. Only it wasn't Roman.

It was Pennywise. The demon clown stood next to the gunslinger. One day Roland would understand what Rachel saw in him.

And maybe one day he and Walter would become best friends.

"If you hurt her, at all..." Roland reached for one of his guns and cocked it, "you better hope I miss."

Pennywise towered over him. "Good, good, you put her out of her misery..."

Pennywise's face was right next to his. Roland could smell his fetid breath.

"...and I finally put you out of yours."

The clown went into her room.

---

Rachel's eyes closed then she jolted awake. She would not be taken off guard this time. Her eyes closed again. Another jolt. She still saw Roland fighting off Sheb with that knife. Her eyes closed again. The men in the barn. She needed to at least lie down. Her eyes closed yet again and she smelled something. Something she hadn't smelled in a good while—cotton candy. She inhaled.

Rachel liked that smell. It reminded her of home. She laid back. As she did, she felt satin underneath her—firm satin. She smelled that cotton candy smell again. She ran her hand up the satin and felt something poofy. A pom pom.

A firm arm wrapped around her and pulled her close. With a smile on her face, she let out a deep sigh and let herself relax.

Maybe she was home now after all.

## 14. Chapter 14

Rachel ran her hands through Pennywise's cotton candy soft hair as he purred against her bare chest. She had woken up early in the morning and had discarded her shirt so that she could feel the silkiness of his costume better against her. He lifted his head and gently kissed her chest, right over her heart. Then he kissed the edge of her left breast, then her nipple.

Rachel smiled and closed her eyes.

"Did you sleep well, my kitten?" Pennywise asked.

"Hmmm. Yes. It was like being home again."

She opened her eyes and saw Pennywise's yellow orbs staring back at her, his face a mask of seriousness.

"We will get back home, kitten. You'll see."

He ran his gloved hand over Rachel's bare arm.

"You know you never told me what happened to you after we ended up here," she said as she brought a hand up to run it through his hair again.

Pennywise's face turned to a scowl. "Blast that wretched turtle. Trying to keep my queen from me."

Now it was Rachel's turn to frown. "Maturin was responsible?"

"I was lost in the desert. Couldn't find you. Our link was broken."

Rachel patted his back. "Well I'm sure Maturin wasn't responsible for that," she said in a soothing voice. The last thing she needed was for her mate to get upset and start causing a ruckus.

She pushed her elbows up underneath her. "Look. We don't have to talk about this right now if you don't want. Why don't I get dressed? You can bring Roman back. And then we can go for a walk. I still haven't explored the town yet."

Pennywise glanced towards the window. "This town is at ill rest. It is not safe for my kitten to stay here much longer."

"What do you..." Rachel was confused. Was that where Pennywise had been all this time? Milling around the townspeople? "How do you know that? Do you sense something?"

Pennywise didn't answer her. He sat up and climbed on top of her. Just like he used to do.

"You are my mate. My queen. Forever. I will protect you. No sorcerer or anyone else will take you from me."

His voice might have been resolute, but she could see the worry on his face. Something was definitely worrying her mate. He leaned his head down slowly towards hers, his lips capturing hers in a brief, gentle kiss. He pulled away and their eyes met. His eyes scanned her face as if he was memorizing it. Then he kissed her again. But unlike the first one, this one was deep, and full of desperation and need.

Rachel broke the kiss and threw her arms around him, burying her face in Pennywise's collar. They held each other for a while.

And for at least this small amount of time, Rachel's world was alright again.

---

Walter watched her and the clown kiss, his hands pressed against the edge of the viewing contraption. He put his weight on them. His blood boiled in his veins. The brass underneath his hands started to sizzle. It was time. Time to get her out of that measly, pathetic little town. He would flush her out if he had to. He mentally cursed himself. He had not been expecting her when he had laid his little trap for the gunslinger. He would have to stop it himself. She would surely be killed.

He couldn't have that at all.

---

Rachel flounced down the stairs. She had left Pennywise in her room so that he could change back into Roman. She needed to find Roland.

Something wasn't right. She wondered if Pennywise knew about Sheb's attempted attack.

Roland and Allie were sitting at one of the tables in the main room.

"Good morning," she announced as she approached them.

"Mornin'" Roland leaned back in his chair, a surprised look on his face. Was it really that uncommon for her to be in a good mood?

"Well, well, you look awfully chipper this morning." Allie raised her eyebrows at Rachel.

Rachel gave her a sheepish grin. "I always sleep better next to my husband."

Allie rested her elbow on the table and plopped her chin in her hand, a goofy smile on her face. "I bet you do."

Rachel turned to Roland. "Can I talk to you, please?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Sure."

He got up and followed Rachel to the hall.

"Quickly. I don't want Roman to know we're talking," she said.

She took Roland to the washroom. When he got inside, she closed the door behind them. She held up her hand, palm forward.

"Look, I don't mean to freak you out, but I need to tell you something. Pennywise told me something just now. He said that the town was at an ill rest. And that he didn't know how much longer I'll be able to stay here."

Roland raised an eyebrow at her.

"Did you hear anything or see anything that didn't sound right?" She waved her hands side to side for emphasis. "Besides Sheb?"

Roland opened his mouth and licked his lips. "Rachel...there's no need for you to be frightened."



"Holy fucking shit." She put her hand over her mouth. "You did see something. What? What's going on? Are we in danger?"

Now it was Roland's turn to hold his palm up. "Nothing to be alarmed about just yet."

She gaped at him. "Just yet?" she said in a high pitched voice. She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. "Oh no. No. You and Pennywise are both concerned. There's absolutely nothing to freak out about at all," she said sarcastically.

"Look, you want me to tell you," Roland said in a lowered voice, "you have to promise me you won't tell anyone. Not even Allie. Or Roman."

Holy crap, this wasn't good. Not tell her husband? She took a deep breath.

"Alright. I promise. Tell me."

"Yesterday at the service, something didn't seem right. The preacher woman talked about someone called the Interloper. Like I said yesterday, fire and brimstone. I thought she was talking about the Devil. Hell I'm sure that's what everyone else was thinking too. But it was the wording she used. It was like this Interloper was an actual person. A specific person."

Rachel nodded to let him know she understood.

"I think that this Interloper...was me."

Rachel's eyebrows arched and her mouth fell open. "Wait...you?" She pointed at Roland. "I don't..." She shook her head. "How could she have been talking about you? You're as far from being the Devil as it gets."

He gave her a nod. "Thank you. But remember, Walter has been here. We don't know what he did or who he did it to."

Rachel blinked at him like an owl, her mouth still hanging open. She slowly nodded her head. "Sooo you think Walter did something to the town. As a whole."

"It's possible."

Rachel let out a shaky breath. "Ohhh my God. Pennywise was right. We may have to haul it out of here soon."

Rachel placed a hand on top of her head. The idea of Walter having influence over the entire town scared her more than she wanted to think about. She thought of Sheb barging into her room the previous afternoon. That was just one person. Maybe she could call Walter for real this time. Talk to him. But what would be his price? And would she even be able to pay it? No. They would find another way.

"What about the preacher? Do you think we can try asking her about Walter?" she asked Roland.

"I was thinking about it. But I need you to stay here."

"What? No!"

"Rachel..."

"No, Roland. Walter's not just after you. I need to hear what she has to say."

She met Roland with a steady gaze.

Roland sighed. "Fine. But just the two of us."

He started to walk past Rachel.

She snorted. "I don't think Pennywise would be able to enter a church anyway."

She started to follow him out, but then stopped. Would she even be able to enter a church?

---

They didn't go to the church. Just a shack with a large wooden cross nailed to it that lay at the far edge of town. The woman's name was Sylvia. Sylvia Pittston. Roland knocked at the door. No answer. He knocked again. Finally he just decided to open it. The hinges had a horrible screech to them.

Sylvia was sitting in a rocking chair. She was a large, robust woman with creamy white skin and a mountain of reddish brown hair piled upon her head. A sleeveless brown dress hugged her frame. Dark brown eyes regarded Rachel with a coolly. The woman could have been a goddess.

Or a witch. You could never tell nowadays.

"You will never catch him. You walk in the way of evil," Sylvia said.

"He came to you," Roland replied.

"And to my bed. He spoke to me in the Tongue. The High Speech. He-"

"He screwed you. In every sense of the word."

Rachel raised her eyebrows at Roland. This was the first time she had ever heard the gunslinger come even close to cursing.

The woman didn't even flinch. "You walk an evil way, gunslinger. You stand in shadows. You stood in the shadows of the church yesterday? Did you think I did not see you?"

"Why did he heal the weed eater?"

"He's an angel of God. He said so."

Rachel couldn't stop herself. She snorted. Sylvia's dark gaze turned to her.

"Sorry," Rachel said sheepishly. She let out a fake cough. "Dusty in here."

"I know you, Jezebel. He spoke of you. The dark seductress. He said you would try to corrupt him."

"What?!" Rachel cried. "When did you talk to him? When did he tell you this? It's a lie. It's a goddamn lie! He came to me. He's the one who bedded me. What in the hell..."

She couldn't even finish. Her hands balled into fists. Walter must

have brainwashed this woman somehow. But why even tell her about Rachel? And did that mean he had come to Sylvia recently? Something wasn't adding up.

"Wait a minute. I have only been here for a few days. You couldn't have found out that you were pregnant that fast. That means..." She narrowed her eyes at Sylvia. "He must have contacted you somehow. Was it in a dream? Did he really tell you those things about me? Or did he tell you something else? Something to make you hate me?" She took a few steps towards Sylvia. She leered down at the older woman. "Something to make you jealous of me?"

One corner of Sylvia's mouth lifted. "You walk in the way of evil. You try to tempt me into anger. Just as you tempted him into lust."

Rachel shook her head slowly. "You're fucking sick." She turned away from Sylvia.

Sylvia calmly turned her attention back to Roland. "Don't worry. He told me of you too. He said you would follow. That you are the Antichrist."

"Oh my God," Rachel breathed. She swiped her hands over her face.

"He said you would want to bed me. Is it true?"

Rachel shook her head. This woman really was messed up. Luckily Roland didn't take the bait. Like he would have anyway.

Roland sighed. "No. I don't want to bed you," he told Sylvia.

"Are you sure? Most men want to when they see me."

Sylvia crossed her legs, causing her dress to ride up her thigh. And yet Rachel was the seductress? She and Walter needed to have words badly.

"Though it would cost you," Sylvia continued. "The price of my flesh would be your life, gunslinger. He has got me with child."

"What?" Rachel's voice came out in a whisper. Her mouth fell open in surprise and horror.

Sylvia was pregnant for Walter. Rachel started to back away. He had taken Rachel's child. Taken Eleanor from her. And now Sylvia was pregnant. Did Walter even know? Did he even care? Had he even seen Sylvia again since he took her?

"I am sorry to hear that," Roland said dolefully.

Sylvia frowned. "Sorry? He has left me with a blessing. The child of a great king grows inside me."

"You have a demon, ma'am. Not a king."

Rachel's eyes flew back to Roland. A demon? Walter was a demon too? So he had lied to Rachel as well. What was it about her that attracted these strong, dangerous men? Men who weren't men at all? Men who only knew how to lie and manipulate?

Not Pennywise, she reminded herself. True he had put Rachel into some pretty unscrupulous situations, but he loved her. He had loved Eleanor. And even though it would have gone completely against his nature, he had been at least willing to try to raise their daughter.

And where was Walter now? Why wasn't he here with the woman carrying his child? But out of all this, there was only two questions that stuck out in Rachel's mind above all others...

What had Walter told Sylvia about her?

And most importantly, *why*?

In a fit of anger and desperation she threw her mind open and did something that she had sworn to herself she would never do.

She called the Man in Black.

She vaguely heard Roland call her name as she turned and stalked out of the shack. She needed to be out in the open. Needed to be where Walter could see her and where she could see him. The air was still, like the entire town was holding its breath. Her tennis shoes echoed on the dry dirt as she went back to the main drag. Roman would be out there too, scouting for anything or anyone that could become an immediate danger to his mate. She had asked him not to

kill anyone, not unless they had come after any of them first.

"You know I never pictured you for a crusader."

Rachel was coming up between two houses when she heard the voice. She stopped in her tracks.

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me," she answered calmly.

She turned around. Walter stood a good bit behind her, his hands behind his back.

He casually strolled towards her. "And why would you care about some woman carrying my child?"

She shrugged. "Why would you not? That's the question."

"Who says I don't?"

Rachel shot him a look of confusion. "Well if you do, then you could have fooled me."

He was right up to her now. "Like I said, why do you care?"

"Because you took my child."

"And you want me to give you one of my own?" He started circling her.

Rachel clenched her teeth. "Don't even flatter yourself. I just want to know why you did this to us. Why you could just go from one to the other without even batting an eye."

"And you called me all the way over here just to find that out?"

"Are you complaining?"

Walter chuckled. "You are learning. That's a good thing."

"Who did you have first?"

"Now that is a *very* personal question." He stopped just to her right.

"Just fricking answer me. Was it me or her?"

He leaned in towards her. "Now you're starting to sound like the jealous girlfriend," he said in a low voice.

"Oh yeah I am *really* jealous of some woman that you deceived and then knocked up." She held her hands up palms forward and hunched her shoulders. "Oooh. So jealous."

A moment of silence passed.

"Her. It was her."

"And why did you tell her about me? And lie on top of that?"

"Because *you* are none of her goddamn business, that's why!"

At the edge of a volcano indeed.

"But I am not *yours* either."

The look on Walter's face was hard to read. For once he didn't respond. In a way, that scared her more than anything.

"You know," Rachel hooked her thumbs into the waist of her pants, "a man came into my room yesterday afternoon. Our piano player. He had a knife. He probably would have killed me in my sleep if Roland hadn't been there. And just now the preacher called me an evil seductress." She tucked her bottom lip in. "I didn't ask for any of this, Walter. I'm sorry if I interrupted you from anything. Have a good rest of your day." She started to walk away but stopped and turned back. "I know Pennywise isn't exactly first in line for Father of the Year award. Or even husband for that matter. But at least he would have tried to be there for our daughter. Think about that."

Then she turned and left.

---

She was nauseated again. Rachel paced back and forth near the short side of the bar near the stairs. She rubbed her stomach and tried to take deep breaths. The saloon was full. And the crowd was getting rowdy. Sheb was usually there by now playing the piano. Even Allie

was starting to get antsy.

"Should we call the doctor?" Roland asked Roman.

"She should be fine." Roman put his arms around Rachel and pulled her against him. She rested her head against his chest.

Rachel's heart pounded. All she could think about was what Sylvia had said earlier that morning. 'He has got me with child'. Rachel put her arm around Roman and clutched at the back of his shirt.

No. She wasn't pregnant. There was something else that was ailing her. They just needed to figure out what.

The front doors flew open. Two men came in.

"We found him! We found Sheb!"

All heads turned towards them. The two men approached the bar.

"We found 'im in an alley. He dead. His neck was all burnt up. We found this too."

The man slammed a small piece of paper onto the bar. Allie picked it up and read it.

"Did you find anything else?"

"Just this. And ain't none of us can make a lick of sense of it neither."

Allie handed the paper to Roland. "Maybe you can make something of it."

Roland read it. He glanced up at Rachel. Why was he looking at her? What could she possibly have to do with Sheb's death?

He held his hand out. She reluctantly withdrew herself from Roman's embrace. Her hand was shaking when she grabbed the paper from Roland. When she read it her heart almost stopped. There was only one line.

*Next time you call my name, you better scream it. W*



Rachel felt like she couldn't breathe. The note was obviously for her. Walter had killed Sheb. For her. And from the way it sounded, he expected payment for it. But why scream his name? She had only done that with Pennywise a few times: the night when she was attacked in the alley back at home.

And when they had sex.

## 15. Chapter 15

*\*\*Rated for brief sensuality\*\**

Shaking. She couldn't stop it. And her body had gone cold. He was going to force her to have sex with him. Actually force her this time. She gripped onto Roman's forearm.

"Rachel? Kitten, what's wrong?"

A garbled sound escaped her throat. She made her hand into a fist, scrunching up the note as she did so. Her legs grew weak.

"I need...chair."

"Get her a chair!" Roman commanded, though his voice sounded muffled. "Kitten, what's wrong? Look at me."

Roman was in her face, his hand brushing her temple.

"I did this," she said in a hoarse voice.

"Did what? Baby, what's wrong?"

"Here. Sit her down."

Rachel felt strong hands push her down into a chair. She still clutched the note. Walter had killed Sheb. The man hadn't even touched her. Now he was dead in some dark alleyway. Rachel had been attacked in an alley before. She could still see Pennywise breaking the man's neck.

What was it about her that made demons so willing to answer to her every whim?

Roman was crouched in front of her. "Baby, you are really starting to worry me."

"Look at the note."

That was Roland's voice. Roman took the piece of paper from her

hand. He uncrumpled it and read. Then he stood.

"What is he... Why would she call him?"

"Not here," said Roland. "We have to move her. Get her out of here before anyone starts to figure out what's going on."

"What the fuck is going on? What is this?" Roman's voice was like acid as he held up the note.

Roland shook his head. "I don't know. But if it's for her and it concerns Walter, it's nothing good."

Roman crouched down again. "Baby, I need you to stand. Can you do that?"

"Walter killed him," Rachel said in a hollow voice.

"I know. I know sweetheart. But we need to get you upstairs right now."

"I called him. I called Walter. She is carrying his child. He needs to be there." She rubbed her hands together in her lap. They felt like ice.

"He came to you?"

Rachel nodded. She didn't see the muscle twitch in Roman's jaw.

"I told him about Sheb."

Roland bent down towards the couple. "We *really* need to get her upstairs."

"Alright, kitten, come on. Stand up for me," Roman said in a stern voice.

Rachel stood. Her legs felt leaden. But her shaking had somewhat subsided. She let Roman lead her up the stairs. When they got to her room, it was dark. Even the lamp that was lit in the hall wasn't enough to see beyond a person's silhouette.

"Shit!" Roman exclaimed. "I hate that there's no fucking electricity

here."

"I can-" Rachel stopped herself. She could do what? Light the lamp with her mind? Where in the hell did that thought come from.

Roman turned. "Can do what?"

Rachel shook her head. "Nothing."

*"Yes. Do it, baby girl. You know you want to. You know you can."*

Rachel jumped. Was Walter watching her? Right now? Or was his mind just that in sync with hers? She glanced around nervously as though he would pop out of the shadows.

Roman started rubbing her arm. She could just barely make out his frown.

"Kitten, I know something is bothering you. I really wish you would tell me."

Rachel hated this. She wanted to cry. Roman loved her so much. What if she really was carrying Walter's baby? It would ruin everything. She had told Walter he needed to be there for his child. Did Walter already know? Did he sense it when he was around Rachel, the way that Pennywise had with Eleanor? Is that why he had killed Sheb? Because he was now officially taking claim to what was his?

"Roman, I am so scared. So scared." She broke down into tears.

"Shhh." He put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. "It's gonna be alright." He rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"But you won't want to have anything to do with me anymore."

"Ohh, baby. Baby, that will never happen."

Rachel sniffled. "I told Walter something. Sylvia is pregnant. The preacher. He went to her like he did to me. She's carrying his baby. And I told him..." she took a deep breath. "I told him he needed to be

there for her. I told him that even you wanted to try to be there for our child. And that he should be there for his."

"And that's good, kitten. You did good. I wish you wouldn't have called him, but that's good. I don't know if it's going to work though."

Rachel pulled away from him. "But it did. Roman, I think it did."

"What do you mean?"

Rachel placed her hand on her belly. "I've been nauseated since yesterday morning. I know you know Walter has been here. But we..." She shook her head. "Baby, he didn't take me again. I swear he didn't. It was just the one time at the barn. But I was already pregnant at the time, so none of this makes any sense."

Roman placed his hands firmly on Rachel's shoulders. "Kitten, what are you getting at? Tell me, please."

"Roman...I think I'm pregnant. I think I'm pregnant for Walter."

Silence. Rachel was so nervous she almost started hyperventilating.

"You're...pregnant." Roman dropped his hands and turned away from her.

"W-well I don't know yet. I just started feeling like this. But like I said, there's no way. I had just lost Eleanor..." Her voice trailed off.

"You're pregnant." His voice was deadpan, totally devoid of emotion.

"Penny, please, you know I didn't ask for this." She reached out and touched his arm. He pulled away.

Fresh tears streamed down her face. With all that he had done. With all that he had put her through, this was how he was treating her. Roman said nothing. Instead he turned and walked right past her.

Rachel stared after him in shock. "Roman..."

"Stay with her. Lock her in if you have to," Roman told Roland. He kept going.

"Roman." She started forward, but Roland grabbed her by the shoulders.

"You need to stay here," Roland said.

"But he...I don't know where he's going."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I know. I'm going to go follow him."

"Roland..."

"We can't let Pennywise loose on the streets."

"B-but..."

He bent and kissed her forehead. "Stay here. Right here. If anything happens, lock your door. Do you understand?"

"What are you going-"

"Do you understand?"

Rachel nodded. Roland gave her shoulder a squeeze then followed Roman. Rachel slowly sank to the floor, quiet sobs wracking her body. They had left her. And if something happened to them...

She would have no one. She curled up into a fetal position. She was so done. Done with everything. For the second time in less than a week, she almost wished she were dead. She would be with her daughter. There would be no more pain. Let Walter bring down the Tower. What had the universe done for her anyway?

She cried and cried until she didn't have any strength left. And as she lay on the floor with nothing but her absolute misery as her company, she felt a presence. Strong arms lifted her from behind, one under her legs, the other behind her back. She didn't see who it was. Nor did she care. The person carried her into her dark bedroom and gently laid her on her bed. She felt a hand on her forehead, pushing her hair back. Her lamp came on. She closed her eyes against the sudden brightness.

"There, there," a voice crooned. "Everything's alright."

She knew that voice. Oh did she know that voice. She opened her eyes. Walter's face was inches from hers.

She sniffled. "Turn the light back off. I don't want it."

"Now, sweetheart. You can't go to sleep in these filthy street clothes."

"I don't care what I'm dressed in," she spat. "Just turn the light off and leave me the hell alone." She let her head drop against the pillow. "I want to sleep."

"If I turn this light on, will you let me undress you?"

"Does everything, have to be about fucking sex with you!?" Rachel leaned on her elbow and stared up at him with as much hatred as she could muster. "I don't *want* you. Alright?"

"You need someone, my dear. Last time I checked, your protector just ran out to help control your animalistic husband. I am trying to *help* you. Now do you want this light off or not?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "You're just going to look at me. And touch me, etc, etc."

"Not if the light isn't on."

Rachel watched him carefully. Could she trust him? Would he really take advantage of her for a second time?

Did she even care anymore?

She licked her lips. "Alright. But...if I tell you to stop, with whatever you're doing...you're going to stop."

He gave her a nod. "You got it."

She glanced at the lamp. "Turn it off."

The room went black. She could just make out his silhouette. Rachel got up on her knees. She could hear his breathing in the dark. She

felt his hands at the hem of her shirt. She raised her arms. He started to lift. The shirt went up, over her breasts, and then over her head. She straightened up as much as she could.

"Don't move," she commanded.

For some reason, knowing that he couldn't see her made her braver. Or it could be from the fact that she no longer cared.

Her arm was shaking violently as she lifted it. Her fingertips found his cheek. And his lips. Using her thumb to guide her, she leaned forward. She kissed him. It wasn't exactly a sensual kiss, but it was there. She pulled back a bit to see what he would do. Walter didn't disappoint. He bent down and his lips found hers. He kissed her with fervor and she returned the gesture. His hands snuck around the small of her back and hers went around his neck. She opened her lips and he eagerly joined his tongue to hers. They kissed passionately and soon their breathing started to deepen. He pulled away and brought his lips to her throat. He kissed and suckled. Rachel closed her eyes and sighed. His mouth traveled downward to kiss her clavicle. And down farther still. When his tongue touched her nipple, her eyes flew open. He bit down, causing her to cry out. Her hands gripped the shoulders of his coat. He suckled on her.

Her eyes closed, she cupped the back of his head with her left hand while she passed her right along the inside of his shirt collar at the back of his neck. His own hands drifted downwards to skim the inside of the back of her waistline. There was nothing but darkness, quiet, peaceful darkness and the feeling of Walter's mouth on one of the most intimate parts of her body.

*Bang!*

Rachel's eyes flew opened, her attention on the window.

*Bang!*

She crawled away from Walter towards the window. She could see down into the street due to the lamps. A few men were standing outside. They ran towards the source of the gunshots.



"Shit," Rachel muttered. "I have to go."

She tried to crawl out of bed, but Walter got in front of her.

"No, you don't."

"Someone could be hurt. Roland could be hurt."

"Who do you think was firing those guns?"

Rachel sighed. Walter was right. There was nothing she would be able to do about it anyway.

"I hate being so goddamn helpless."

Walter patted her knee. "Not helpless, my dear. Untrained."

"Hmph. You really think I have that much power in me?"

"I know it."

"Turn the light back on," she commanded.

It came on.

"You really think I can learn to access my powers? To be able to use them so that I don't have to worry about someone there to protect me all the goddamn time?"

"You bet your sweet lips you can."

She grinned at him slyly. "You think my lips are sweet?"

"Hmm maybe I better check again."

Walter leaned forward. His lips met hers, but she barely responded. He pulled back and looked at her.

"What's wrong?"

"A lot of things."

"Ready to call it quits?"

Rachel sighed. "I don't know what I'm ready for. I don't even know if I would be able to have a normal life again."

"Normalcy is gone, sweetheart. The sooner you embrace that, the sooner you can embrace your destiny."

She studied Walter's face. He really was handsome. Why did he have to be so bad?

"And what is my destiny?"

His face lit up into a grin. "That's the beauty part, sweetheart. Only you can discover that for yourself."

She scowled at him. "What happened to the snide, cocky Walter that I've known these last few days?"

He opened his mouth.

"No wait. Don't tell me." She leaned in towards him. "I'll discover that for myself." She kissed him on the cheek then scuttled around him off the bed. She grabbed her night gown. "Would it bother you if I asked you to leave? I don't think it would be a good idea if the guys got back and found you here."

"When will you want me back?"

Rachel stared at him. He was going to let her decide when he would show up again?

She crumpled up her nightgown. "I don't know. I haven't...been feeling well lately. And things are getting pretty crazy in town right now."

Walter came to meet her. "Maybe they'll calm back down."

"Who knows. I just know I'm tired of being sick. I've never been in the hospital before a few months ago. Now I can't seem to get out of it."

"Maybe you should come with me. Take a break from playing little house on the prairie for a while."

Rachel snorted. "Yeah. I'm sure Pennywise would love that. And on that note, you *really* should get out of here."

Walter reached out and stroked a strand of her hair. "Well it has been a pleasure, Miss Porter."

"Yeah it was nice. I kind of like it when I don't have to be afraid of you."

He leaned in towards her. "Well you just let me know when you decide to make that permanent, and we'll go from there."

Rachel gave him a weary smile. "Don't hold your breath."

"Not before I make you lose yours."

He reached out to rub her nipple with his thumb and winked at her. And then he left.

For once, a part of her regretted to see him go.

## 16. Author's NoteSneak Preview

*I have to be honest with y'all. I don't know how long it's going to be until I get another chapter out. My general anxiety has been kind of bad lately and I know part of the reason is because I am constantly trying to keep up with this meta-fantasy soap opera as it plays out in my head. Plus I have a really big fight scene coming up that I have no idea how I am going to play out. I promise I will update as soon as I can, but for now, here's a sneak preview of what's to come. And thank you all again to those of you who continue to support my story.*

---

"My children are the most important thing to me and the *really* messed up part is that it took for the person who has orchestrated all of this bullshit to make me realize that. If Walter destroys the Tower, *none* of this is going to matter anymore. I mean sure, you would probably be able to just go off and hibernate somewhere, but what about me? What about the child growing inside me? And what about Eleanor? What's going to happen to her soul if the Tower is brought down?" She slowly closed the distance between them. "I know where I stand, Roman. I stand with my children...and I stand with the Tower." She paused, trying to let what she had just told him to sink in. "So what about you? Are you going to stand with your wife? Are you going to stand with your *mate*, Pennywise?"

The silence was almost palpable. Off in the distance, a rooster crowed.

"I was planning to bring you into hibernation with me...but it looks like that's not going to happen now." Roman tucked in his lips. He started nodding. "I stand with you," he said softly, and then louder, "I stand with you, Rachel."

Rachel's face lit up. Roman pulled her into his embrace and she threw her arms around him. They were back. She and Roman were back together.

And no one was going to rip them apart this time.

## 17. Chapter 16

*Knock, knock*

Rachel opened her eyes. She thought she had heard something.

*Knock, knock.*

She threw back her covers. Someone was at the door. The knock was soft. It had to have been Roland or Allie. She was halfway across the room when she saw something on top of the little dresser next to the door. Three somethings actually—some kind of small vial, what looked either a choker or necklace, and a piece of paper with some writing on it.

*Knock, knock.*

"Just a second," she called.

She opened the top drawer and hastily stuck the items inside. The vial contained something that looked suspiciously like blood. And a necklace too? There were only two people who could have sent them to her. And Rachel didn't feel like thinking about either one of them. She unlocked the door and threw it open. Roland was standing there. He held one of his guns, his arm hanging slack.

She glanced from his gun to him. "What's wrong?"

"May I come in?"

"Yeah. Sure." She moved aside for him to enter. "What's up?"

"I tried to come in last night. The door was locked. I knocked but you didn't answer."

Rachel's brow knit. "Huh? You'd think I would have heard that. I heard it just now."

Now it was Roland's turn to frown. "You didn't have any...problems, did you?"

"Oh no." Rachel shook her head. "I just...came in my room and got ready for bed."

She felt bad lying to him. But there was no way she could tell him about Walter.

"What happened last night?"

"I had to scare him off. Are you sure you were alright by yourself?"

Rachel tilted her head at him. "Roland...I'm fine. Really."

Actually she felt more than fine. She felt relaxed. Even her stomach wasn't bothering her.

Roland squinted at her and tilted his head sideways. "What is that?" He pointed at her neck.

"What?"

"There's a dark red mark the side of your neck."

Rachel's eyes grew wide. Her stomach knotted up. Walter must have left her a hickie.

"It's uh...I don't know. Maybe something bit me."

She went to the chest at the foot of her bed. Her hands went to pick up her shirt, but she stopped. She slowly picked it up. Then the pants.

Her clothes were completely clean. She let out a heavy sigh. Walter was really going out of his way to make her comfortable. Literally.

She glanced over at her empty bed. She imagined Roman laying there on his side, patting the spot next to her. How badly she missed being in her husband's arms.

"I need to find Roman."

"I'm sure he'll come back. He always does."

She spun around at the bitterness in Roland's voice. "No. I need to find him. Things are getting out of hand. Or they're about to."

Roland narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean? Are you talking about Sylvia?"

"I'm talking about the fact that everyone here around me is getting super protective all of a sudden. First Roman asked you to lock me in my room and then-"

Rachel scowled. How could she have done that to Roman? Even though it had just been a kiss, more than that, she had to remind herself. In a way, Walter had been intimate with her. And not only had she let him, but she had made the first move.

"Rachel..."

Roland's voice snapped her out of her reverie.

"I know something's bothering you. I wish you would tell me."

Rachel lowered her gaze. "There's a lot I wish I could tell you, Roland," she answered quietly. "But I just think it would hurt things more than anything. I know they haven't helped when it comes to Roman."

"But I'm not Roman. I'm here."

Rachel glanced up at him from under her eyelashes. She gave him a small smile. "I know. And I appreciate that. More than you'll ever know."

Roland put out his arms and she stepped into his embrace without hesitation. They stood like that for a minute and she had no desire to step out of his protective, supportive warmth. When they broke apart, Rachel couldn't help but notice the caring, desperate look in Roland's eyes. He reached up to caress her cheek. Slowly, he leaned down towards her.

Rachel's lips parted. Was he about to kiss her? She really didn't want him to, but she was afraid to move. She heard footsteps in the doorway and she and Roland both glanced up.

Roman stood there, his eyes murderous. "Well I guess three really is a crowd. Or more like four in your case."

He turned and disappeared from view.

"Roman!" Rachel called. She followed him down the hall. "Roman, please." He didn't respond. She followed him down the stairs. "Roman, will you please just listen? It's not what it looks like."

He rounded on her. "You seriously cannot wait for me to leave, can you?"

"What in the hell are you talking about? We were just hugging!"

"And did you just hug the sorcerer last night? When he came into your room?"

Rachel's mouth fell open. "Roland said he scared you away."

"Yeah well I came back. Too bad I missed the show."

He turned away from her again and stalked across the main room. There was no way she was letting him leave again.

"Roman, goddamn it, I never cheated on you. Walter came to me but nothing happened. We didn't...Goddamnit, Roman, listen to me!"

He stopped in the middle of the room.

"I never cheated on you. Not with Roland. Or Walter. Nobody." She heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. It looked like Roland was going to get an earful too.

Roman still didn't look at her. When he spoke, his voice sounded pained. "I know your smell, kitten. When you mate...I know your smell. I smelled it last night...And I smelled him." He turned sideways. "Are you still mine?"

Rachel couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could he even ask that? He finally turned. His face looked haggard, worn. He slowly approached her.

"Answer me, Rachel." Finally he stopped right in front of her. "Are you still *mine*? Are you still my *wife*?"



She looked him square in the eye and said without hesitation, "Yes. I did *not* sleep with Walter."

Roman's jaw muscle twitched. "But you did do something with him."

His voice was low, dangerous.

Rachel swallowed. "Yes."

"Did he put his hands on you?"

"Not inappropriately."

It was like in a court room with everyone waiting for the judge to give his final verdict.

"His mouth?"

The gavel fell.

"Yes."

"And you let him?"

Rachel's body felt light, like she was standing outside of herself, watching the whole thing. She saw it flash through her mind—Walter's mouth on her breast, her hand cupping his head.

She let out a shaky breath. "Yes."

Roman nodded. She could only imagine what he was thinking right now.

"It was a kiss, Roman. It was a goddamn *kiss*. You fucking left me. Again. Over things that hadn't been my fault."

"You sure didn't mourn for too long."

"You son of a bitch." She shook her head, anger heating her blood.

Roman's head shot up.

"You left me, Roman. I was on the floor. I was literally on the floor."

You and Roland had both left me." She paused. "You could have both killed each other. For all I knew I was about to lose everything. I wanted to die. I *literally* wanted to die." Another pause. "I felt someone pick me up. I didn't even see who it was. They could have carried me off for all I knew and I wouldn't even have had an ounce of strength to stop them, because I did not *care* anymore!" She was almost hollering now. "Walter brought me in my room. He laid me on my bed. My lamp came on. I told him to leave. I told him to turn the light back off and leave."

"But he didn't," Roman said flatly.

"Hmph. You think it was that easy? He told me that I couldn't go to bed in my dirty clothes and, oh my God, that pissed me off so much! I told him that I didn't want him! And then he...he made a deal with me. That if I let him undress me, that he would turn off the light and leave. So he turned off the light. And then I...I let him take my shirt off. But he didn't touch me. At all. But I..."

She stopped. She saw Roland standing there out of the corner of her eye. Roman leaned forward and placed his hands flat on the table in front of him.

"Then what happened?" he asked.

Rachel's posture drooped. One shoulder of her night gown fell and she didn't even bother to adjust it. "I didn't have a reason to care anymore. I still don't know if I do," she said in a small voice. "But he was there. He was actually trying to take care of me." Her voice broke. Her throat tightened.

This wasn't fair. None of this was. She and Roman were supposed to be happy. They were supposed to be going on dates, to be holding hands and laughing, cuddling and making love. But that was all over now. And something inside Rachel's soul finally broke.

Her voice was hollow as she spoke. "I kissed him. I kissed Walter."

Roman let his head fall. His fingers arched. Rachel could see his nails dig into the wood. "He killed our baby. He tricked you into mating with him."

"I know that! Goddamn it, Roman, you think I don't know that?!"

Roman threw his gaze at her. There was just a hint of yellow in his green eyes. "You did this to me? To get back at me, is that it?"

Rachel took a step back from him. "No. Roman, that was not it at all."

"Then what? I know I haven't been here for you. And I'm sorry if I have trouble handling all this and don't have a home to go back to any more when things get rough."

"Then make me your home." Rachel pointed to herself. "Make me your safe haven. That's what marriage is supposed to be, Roman. For better or for worse. In sickness and in health. I know we never took any vows, but that is how *I* feel. I never stopped loving you. I never stopped *wanting* you. I never stopped believing in US!"

The look on Roman's face was a mix of anger and guilt. And hurt. But Rachel wasn't finished yet. He had hurt her way too much.

"You kidnapped my brother. He is just a toddler. And you kidnapped Georgie. You tried to kill my co-actor so that you could be in my play. You got me pregnant with a monster!"

Roman ran a hand through his hair. He never responded the whole time.

"Maybe one day a man will love me that I don't have to worry about those things with. But not today." She copied his stance, hands flat on the table, and leaned in towards him. "I only...wanted...*you*. We are mated, Roman. I chose that. I chose you. Coming to another dimension has not changed that. Having our link broken has not changed that. And Walter...he will *never* change that. So if anyone has changed us...then it is you." Rachel's stomach growled. She stood. "I am going to get dressed. I want you to think about everything I have just told you."

Rachel turned around and froze. Allie was standing next to Roland, her arms crossed over her chest and a deep frown on her face. Roland's gaze landed on Rachel, and the sorrow she saw in his eyes almost broke her heart. She calmly walked past him, trying to keep a

straight face the whole time. She had laid all her cards on the table. The rest was in Roman's hands now. She climbed the stairs and begrudgingly went back to her room.

She had now hurt the two men she cared for the most. Part of her dreaded going back downstairs. What if they were both gone, for good this time? Would she call on Walter one more time and take him up on his offer to get her out of there? Walter! She remembered the items in the drawer. She quickly locked her door and pulled the top drawer of the dresser open. They were still there. She took a deep breath and lifted out the necklace first. It was a star inlaid with diamonds on a black cord. It looked like the North Star. Rachel ran her thumb along the cord. It felt like silk. There was a clasp on the end of it. She carefully laid it on the top of the dresser. Next came the vial. It was a little taller than the palm of her hand. She opened it and brought it to her nose and inhaled.

"Fuck," she gasped.

Definitely blood. She placed that on the dresser top too. She took a deep breath and held it as she picked up the note. She quickly glanced at the bottom it. Walter's name stared up at her. She let her breath out.

"Lord Jesus Christ," she said tartly.

She dropped her hand to her side and went sat on her bed. She tucked her legs up under her and read.

*The North Star is constant and unwavering. It is the only thing in the night sky that does not move. Remember that the next time you feel lost. Follow the star...and you will find your destiny.*

Hmm. Follow the North Star? Was Walter trying to tell her where he was? But then he had to know that would lead Roland and Pennywise to him also. And wait a minute. Did that mean Walter was telling her that he was her destiny? Of course. He had told her that before. The night he had been waiting for her in her bedroom. She continued reading.

Yes, **the blood is mine**. Use it sparingly. It will help you with your

*condition. I have a project that I am working on right now that needs my utmost attention. I will not be able to come to you for a while, so do not call me unless it is absolutely urgent.*

*Wear the choker. Black looks good on you. And I know you think it feels good too.*

*Walter*

Rachel's stomach flip flopped at that last line. Her face grew hot. Feels good? Of course. He had to have been talking about last night. That he was the "black" that she thought felt good on her. Clever man. Devious, but clever. And there was something else about the letter that stuck out of her too. 'The blood is mine'. That line was darker than the rest. Was it a code for something? Every section of the note had different meanings to it, but why give special attention to this one? She reread the line again. And then the two lines after that. He had mentioned her condition. Rachel scowled at the letter. She had told Walter she hadn't been feeling well, but condition? The blood is mine. Her heart started pounding faster than it already was. She knew why he made that line stand out above the rest. He was answering a question. A question she had had about her condition. The condition that was growing in her womb.

Walter's unborn child.

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Rachel trudged down the stairs. She had been in her room for longer than she had been expecting, but she had had a lot of thinking to do. To her surprise, Roman and Roland were both sitting, waiting for her. They both stood when she got down. Roman's hands were in his pockets as he made his way to her.

"I thought you would have left again," Rachel said.

"There is nowhere else I want to be," said Roman. "Nowhere else worth being."

The corner of Rachel's mouth lifted. She glanced over at Roland. He gave her a nod. Apparently he felt the same. She let out a deep sigh.

Roman's face turned into a scowl. "Where did you get the necklace?"

She handed him the note, then stood with her hands behind her back, not saying anything. Her face burned the whole time. She kept passing furtive glances at Roland and her blush deepened. She thought Roman was going to crumple up the note, but to her surprise, he handed it to Roland.

Roman glanced at her but then quickly looked away. She could tell he was trying to keep his face neutral. He went to cross his arms, but then seemed to change his mind and then put them back in his pockets.

"So you are with child." Roland handed her back the note.

"You caught that too, huh?" Rachel took the note back from him. She folded it up.

"His project? I don't like the sound of that." Roland crossed his arms across his chest and started pacing.

"I don't like the sound of any of this," Rachel retorted, gesturing with her hand that held the note. "I can handle wearing the necklace, but the fact that he wants me to keep drinking his blood? That it will help with the baby? I didn't even need to drink blood when I was pregnant for Eleanor."

"Walter is a demon," Roland said flatly.

"I know that. But so is Roman. You know what scares me though? Walter told me a while back that he killed Eleanor on purpose. What if he was afraid for me? If he is a demon, then he knows that my carrying Eleanor wouldn't have been good for me after a while."

"Of course he wants to take care of his own child," Roman retorted.

"Exactly. But my thing is, if he didn't want Eleanor to hurt me..."

"Then this child was an accident," Roland finished for her.

"Exactly. Not even Walter was expecting me to get pregnant, you guys."

"Rachel, what are you getting at?" Roman asked.

"What if my getting pregnant for him *wasn't* an accident? In fact, what if getting pregnant for either of my children wasn't an accident? I mean, think about it. Eleanor's spirit is still in the Tower. And I can go to the Tower. Sooo..." She waved her hands about. Both men stared at her with questioning gazes.

Rachel smiled. For the first time in days, she actually smiled. It was like everything finally made sense to her now. "What if I'm meant to be a guardian of the Tower?"

Roman stared at her as if she had just told him she and Walter were getting married.

"There were guardians at one time. The gunslingers. My people. We protected the Tower," said Roland.

"I don't think that's the kind she's talking about," said Roman. "There are other guardians. Twelve of them. And they are all animals" He shook his head. "Kitten, I don't think you know what you're talking about."

"I know exactly what I'm talking about, Roman. My children are the most important thing to me and the *really* messed up part is that it took for the person who has orchestrated all of this bullshit to make me realize that. If Walter destroys the Tower, *none* of this is going to matter anymore. I mean sure, you would probably be able to just go off and hibernate somewhere, but what about me? What about the child growing inside me? And what about Eleanor? What's going to happen to her soul if the Tower is brought down?" She slowly closed the distance between her and Roman. "I know where I stand, Roman. I stand with my children...and I stand with the Tower." She paused, trying to let what she had just told him to sink in. "So what about you? Are you going to stand with your wife? Are you going to stand with your *mate*, Pennywise?"

The silence was almost palpable. Off in the distance, a rooster crowed.

"I was planning to bring you into hibernation with me...but it looks

like that's not going to happen now." Roman tucked in his lips. He started nodding. "I stand with you," he said softly, and then louder, "I stand with you, Rachel."

Rachel's face lit up. Roman pulled her into his embrace and she threw her arms around him. They were back. She and Roman were back together.

And no one was going to rip them apart this time.

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**Author's Note:** *Wow I was not expecting to have that much to say before the Battle of Tull scene. NOW it's probably going to be a while before I put the next chapter out. Lol. Well our girl finally told Roman like it is. And Walter has now officially laid his claim on her. Yikes! I wonder how he's going to react when he finds out that not only are she and Roman back together for good this time, but that Rachel is now going to actively support Roland and his quest to save the Tower. Looks like you're going to have to up your game, Walter.*



## 18. Chapter 17

\*\*\**rated for sexuality and violence*\*\*\*

Rachel frowned at the choices of ladies coats. Not too many of them. And they were all either brown or black.

"Hmm let's see. Small frame..."

The seamstress that ran the shop flitted around Rachel. The woman must have been in her thirties and from the way she was doting over Rachel, she could tell that the woman didn't get much business.

"I was just so thrilled when your husband brought you that outfit," the woman went on. "And it looks so good with your coloring."

Rachel couldn't help but smile at that. She had been feeling well so far today and her sallow skin was now back to its usual peachy tone. The woman had also commented on Rachel's "glow" when she and Roman first entered the shop.

*Great, first I drink blood, now I'm glowing. What's next, bleeding ectoplasm?* Rachel had thought bitterly.

"Now this one," the seamstress pulled out a little black coat, "this one should suit just nicely."

She took the coat off the hanger and handed it to Rachel. It was soft and the material almost felt stretchy. Odd. Rachel didn't think they would have had fabric like that in the wild west days. She tried it on. It fit just loosely enough over her shirt. She moved and flexed her arms.

"Now that is mighty nice," said the seamstress. "Come see in the mirror."

There was a full length mirror, like you would see in a dressing room, on a stand against the wall. When Rachel saw herself, she froze. She did look very spiffy. With her dark red shirt and North Star choker on its black cord, she did like a woman who did not put up with people's bullshit. Too bad she didn't feel that way. She had been a sucker for

Pennywise and now even Walter seemed to think that he carried her in his back pocket. She pulled her hair out of the coat and let it hang loosely down her back.

"We'll need some boots as well," she heard Roman tell the seamstress.

Rachel stared at her choker. Not too long ago, Roman had given her a token as well—a gold and silver bracelet with gold sun and silver moon charms on it. Pennywise had gone in her room one night and had found a drawing that she had done of the sun and moon personified as a man and woman. And she had told him their story. How they had fallen in love, but could never be together. Rachel glanced over at Roland standing guard at the door. Yes they were all like celestial bodies personified. Roland was the earth, steadfast and grounded. And she guessed that made her the moon, Roland's little satellite, his bit of light in the darkness that constantly surrounded him. Then that would make Roman the sun, because no matter where he went, there was no denying his presence. She glanced back at the mirror. At the star that sat just below the hollow of her throat. Walter. The North Star. He had told her to follow it. That it would lead her to her destiny. But if he was her destiny, then how so? Was she meant to fight him? To join with him? And what did that mean for her and Pennywise? Or her unborn child for that matter?

The mirror rippled. Rachel's eyes grew wide. She must have been seeing things. It did it again. It was like when you step into a lake and or a bathtub. Her image disappeared. In fact, she wasn't even seeing the clothing shop anymore. But it was a place she had seen a couple of times. Dark stone walls sat on either side of the mirror. Beyond a bright blue sky beckoned. And a wide, railing less balcony that she had stood on before. That she had stood on with her daughter. Rachel's breath caught in her throat. Was this real? Was she really seeing the inside of the Tower, like the mirror had just made a portal? Or was it just a vision? She slowly reached her hand out. Did she dare try to touch it?

"Rachel."

She heard someone softly say her name. It sounded like Roland. Her hand was just inches away from the mirror's surface.

"Don't!"

Someone grabbed her forearm. She whipped around to face Roman, who was holding onto her arm like a vice.

(((O)))

Her face was so sad. So forlorn. He wished he could have seen her true colors, to see the full beauty of the woman who floated before him in the blue dust. What was she thinking of that made her so sad? He wanted to put his arms around her. To pull her into his embrace and never let go. Her face changed. She now stared in awe at something. Her hand reached out. The dust shifted. And so did the colors. Of course Walter couldn't see exactly what she was looking at, but right in the middle of the dust, it wasn't blue anymore. It was a silvery black. There was only one thing Walter knew of that could emit magic that would come out that color and that would show up when the viewing orbs were activated.

Either Rachel was seeing the Tower... or she had opened a portal.

(((O)))

Rachel's angry stare went from her arm to Roman's face. "Why did you do that?"

"You really want to go to the Tower that fucking badly, do it on your own time."

Rachel's mouth fell open in astonishment. "That was real?!"

She turned back to the mirror. It rippled back to normal.

Roland came up to them. "What just happened? What was that?"

"Nothing," Roman spat. "After you get your boots, we're leaving," he told Rachel.

She stared at him aghast. "What? Leaving the shop or Tull? And why are you acting like this? What the hell did I do now?"

The seamstress came out the back of the shop. She carried a pair of

boots in each hand. Roman shot Rachel a look that said 'not now'.

(((((O))))))

"So the Tower's aura showed up in the orb?"

"That is *exactly* what I am saying, Sayre."

"And you do not know what that means?"

"It means that I need to get my future bride away from the gunslinger and the clown. Away from their protection and their influence so that I can talk to her."

Walter opened the secret cabinet that held his share of Maerlyn's Rainbow. The black orb sat at the very top shelf.

---

So Rachel left with a pair of new boots and a new coat.

"Roland, thank you again so much," she sweetly told the gunslinger after they left the shop.

"No problem," he told her.

"And why did you decide to go into asshole mode again all of a sudden?" she asked Roman, all sweetness in her voice now gone. "I just saw a random vision of the Tower. I know it was kind of surprising and freaky but--"

Roman rounded on her. "That was *not* a vision, Rachel. I know you know it wasn't."

"Well if I would have been able to *touch* it, maybe I would have found out for sure." Her eyes shot daggers at Roman as she leaned on one hip and crossed her arms over her chest.

"*Why* do you want to go back to the Tower so badly?"

"Because it's *peaceful*, unlike my life down here that has been almost nothing but shit. And my daughter is there. Do you really have to ask?"

"Can we please not talk about this right now?" said Roland.

Roman shot Roland a glare. "Gladly." He turned and started walking again.

Rachel stared after her husband. His moods! Would she ever be able to get used to them?

(((O)))

Walter held Black Thirteen in his hand. The orb was his favorite as it contained a bit of the essence of the Tower itself. Silvery swirls danced in its depths similar to the ones he had seen Rachel witness. When he had first met her in the desert, Walter had sensed that there was something special about her. He had thought at the time that it had been because of Pennywise. He let his mind wonder to another night. The night that he had lain with her.

He had ridden her slowly, a moan or a sigh escaping her beautiful lips with every thrust. He could feel her demon magic rolling off of her, undulating like waves, not just in his mind had he felt it, but in his body and spirit as well. He had slowly conjoined his magic with hers, cementing the bond with her that his blood had infused.

"You know you cannot win with him," he spoke to the orb.

(((O)))

Rachel stopped in the middle of the street.

*"Remember that night, baby girl. You know who it was you really made love to."*

Rachel let out a shaky breath. Walter was speaking to her. Right now. In her mind. Was he watching her as well?

(((O)))

"You know that his version of love is hollow. That it is a pale comparison to what..."

(((O)))

*"...you and I could share."*

Roland stopped. He shot Rachel a worried glance. "What's wrong?" he asked her.

Rachel cleared her throat. "Nothing. I was just...thinking." She started walking again.

(((O)))

"You know who you really want in your bed at night, caressing your brow, holding you..."

(((O)))

*"...fulfilling your every desire."*

Rachel's steps started to falter. She felt like her legs were turning to jello. She imagined Walter lying next to her as she slept, combing through her hair with his fingers.

No. It would never come to that. She was committed to Roman. And when they would get back to her room, she would show him just how much she both needed and wanted him.

She threw her mind open. *"You want to know who I want in my bed? You just keep on watching."*

A devious smile lit up her face. "And enjoy the show."

(((O)))

Walter placed Black Thirteen back in the cabinet. He stalked past Sayre, who was still standing nearby.

"I am done playing games. Bring Rachel Porter to me."

---

Rachel moaned deeply as Romans' long fingers dug into her bare shoulders. "Damn, baby, I should have asked you to do this a long time ago."

Roman kissed the top of her head. He was kneeling on her bed behind her. "I'm sorry. If I would have known, you know I would have done it."

"I never really thought about it, to be honest."

He leaned down and kissed her shoulder. Then he wrapped his arms around her and joined her in watching out the window. They were both topless. Rachel wrapped her arms around his and sighed.

"You don't know how much I've missed this."

"Me too, kitten. Just to be here with you. To feel your skin against mine. There's no better feeling in the world."

She turned in his arms, a sly grin on her face. "I can think of one better."

Roman licked his lips. "Turn around."

She turned to face him.

"Slide forward."

She did as he told her. Roman started to slide off her pants. Her core started to tingle as he eyed her nakedness.

"Get on your stomach."

Once again she obeyed. Roman continued to undress himself. He straddled her legs and started to massage her back. Rachel tensed up and gasped.

Roman stilled his hands. "What's wrong?"

Rachel felt like she couldn't breathe. Not too long ago Walter had promised her a back massage. But she had been with Roman all day. She took a deep breath.

"Nothing. I guess I've just been really tense lately."

She laid back flat.

"We don't have to do this-"

"No, it's alright. Please continue."

Roman placed his hands on either side of her lower back and started massaging. Rachel turned her head to the side. Roman was being very attentive now. She felt guilt course through her, but she made herself relax. This was the man she really belonged with. Roman's hand moved up higher and she could feel the tip of his erection between her ass cheeks.

Rachel lifted her pelvis. She moaned. "Hmmm put it a little lower."

He pressed his tip against her opening. Rachel spread her legs. "Baby, please take me," she said gently.

Roman sighed. "Kitten, you know I would love nothing more."

She frowned at the concern in his voice. "But what?"

"I don't want to hurt you. I know you've been through...a lot lately."

She turned to look at him over her shoulder. "There are ways to be gentle, my love. Ways that only you can do."

Roman caressed her thigh. She heard a soft squelching sound. Then something small and slick gently pushed against her opening.

Roman leaned over her. "Get on your knees, baby."

Rachel's core was throbbing as she got on her hands and knees. The muscles in her lower body clenched as something slithered up inside her. She moaned loudly.

He was using his tentacle. Rachel leaned downward and he pushed it in farther. She let out a shaky breath.

"Yes," she breathed.

He pulled out a bit, then slowly thrust forward. "You want this?"

"Yesss."



"Tell me you want me, baby." Another slow thrust.

"I want you. I want you, Roman."

He pushed himself in farther, hitting her sweet spot. She let out a loud, shaky moan. There was no way that makeup sex had ever in history felt as good to anyone as this was going to feel.

And she didn't care if anyone knew it either.

---

It was later that afternoon. Rachel, Roland and Allie were sitting at one of the tables playing Watch Me, which Rachel came to realize was very similar to poker even though she had never actually played it herself. Roman was slowly pacing next to the door, his hands in his pockets. Did he sense something that he wasn't telling her? Or was he just paranoid?

"He loves you."

Rachel turned her attention back to Roland, who was sitting to her left. Allie had gotten up to check on something, so Rachel could talk to the gunslinger freely.

"I know. I just hate seeing him this unwound. To be honest, he didn't stay with me much back at home, even when I was in the hospital. I think it wearies him being in this form."

Roland gave her a small smile. "But he is here."

Rachel answered him with a smile on her own.

"I don't like how quiet it is out there." Roman was coming to meet them. "I feel like something's about to happen."

"Babe, we can't keep living like this. Sit and watch us play cards. Maybe we can go for a walk later."

"I don't think you should leave the saloon right now. Not after what happened with the-"

There was a faint thud that sounded from above. And then a few

more. The trio looked up at the same time.

"What was that?" Rachel asked nervously.

"Sounded like something's on the roof," said Roland. He sat his cards down and pulled one of his guns.

Louder thuds. Rachel stood. "Roman..." She grabbed Roman's arm.

"It's okay, kitten. You'll be safe." He put his hand on her back.

More loud thuds near the front of the roof.

"What in the hell is that?" Rachel hugged herself.

Roman slowly made his way to the front door.

"Roman." Rachel took a step forward.

Roland put his hand on her arm. "Wait."

Roman was almost to the first set of tables when the front door burst open. Rachel gave a yelp as two men who looked more like creatures from Middle Earth came through. Both of them carried some kind of long blade. One of them came at Roman, who quickly grabbed the nearest chair and smashed it to pieces against the man. He staggered backwards. A shot rang out and the other man hit the floor. Roman grabbed his blade just as another goon came at him. The man creature swung his blade at Roman who parried to the right and sliced the man's stomach open. The strange looking creature clutched at his stomach and made a garbled sound as he too fell to the floor.

Roman ran out the door.

"Roman!" Rachel hollered as she ran after him.

Roland called her name, but she didn't stop. Even without any powers or weapons, she couldn't let Roman fight alone. The pair stumbled their way into the streets. Roman didn't even say anything about her following him. He didn't even notice. His expression turned to horror as his gaze fell on the roof. Rachel followed his gaze and

immediately wished she would have stayed inside.

It was the undead looking man from the bar the first night they were there. He hung with his arms flung out and what looked like wooden stakes had been stuck through his wrists, attaching him to the top front of the building.

Someone had crucified him.

And if the sight of that didn't churn her stomach enough, underneath what appeared to be a painted red swirly eye was a message also in red.

*Surrender my queen*

*Or die*

Rachel pointed with a shaky hand. "W-what is that symbol?"

"You don't want to know," Roman said in forlorn voice.

"The Crimson King. He is the equivalent of the Devil," said Roland, who had come out to join them.

Surrender my queen? With a symbol for what apparently was Mid-World's version of the Devil? Rachel felt a sick feeling in her stomach that had nothing to do with morning sickness. What if Walter didn't really want her for himself after all? What if he had a darker, more sinister purpose for her?

"Roland. We have another problem."

Roman was to Rachel's right. She and the gunslinger both turned their heads to see what he was talking about.

A mob. That was all Rachel could call it. A mob of people slowly advanced on them from down the street.

"Are you shitting me right now?!" Rachel cried in dismay.

She saw movement out the corner of her eye at the saloon. Allie had just come out onto the boardwalk, a look of shock and horror on her

face.

"Allie, don't! Stay inside!" Rachel called to her.

"Allie, get back inside! Take cover!" Roland called to her as well.

The bartender turned tail and retreated back indoors. The mob still advanced.

"Roland, what do we do?" Rachel asked.

Roman put his hand on Rachel's arm. "Rachel, I need you to try to access your powers."

Her eyes got big. "What? Why?"

"Just do it. I can't protect you like this. I don't even know if I'll be able to do it as Pennywise."

"But I've never accessed my powers before," Rachel protested.

"None of us will be able to fight that many of them," Roland pointed out. "We need to take shelter."

The general store. When Rachel had the dream that the black dragon was burning down Tull, she had taken refuge in there.

"What about the general store? There's plenty we can use as to form a blockade."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Roman agreed.

The trio took off running. Behind them, the mob gave chase. They waved sharpened wooden spikes and pitchforks. Rachel prayed none of them had any guns. They made it into the store with only a couple of minutes to spare. A heavy table sat to the right of the door. Right as Roman and Roland moved it to make a wedge against the door, the mob arrived. Rachel screeched as the windows on either side of the door shattered and the table buckled. The armed citizens of Tull started to try to climb through. Roland let his bullets fly. Rachel had never seen anyone shot before. Their bodies grew limp. But still others came. Each man and woman had a crazed look in their eyes.

"KILL THE INTERLOPER! KILL THE DEMON AND HIS BRIDE!"

Roman was at the other window, slicing and hacking away with his blade. Rachel stood in the middle of the two. If the door gave way, they would all be lost. She tried to focus. She had only accessed her powers one time and once again it had been in her Walter dragon dream. This was very real.

And if she didn't do something soon...they would all be very dead.

The door started to splinter. Any second now and they would be through. Rachel dropped to her knees. She had never been the praying type. She didn't even know if it would work now. But she closed her eyes, opened her mind.

And tried to contact Maturin.

(((O)))

Walter cursed himself. It took all he had not to take the orb and throw it against the wall. Not that that would have broken it. He should have just killed that preacher woman after he had seen her jealousy at him telling her to leave Roland and Rachel alone. But he had not wanted to kill the Crimson King's offspring.

Now he had just condemned his own.

(((O)))

*"I know you brought me here for a reason. I know you want me to protect the Tower. Spare me so that I can do that. Or let me be with my daughter."*

(((O)))

Walter saw her on her knees. Her eyes were closed. It looked like she was praying. Like her silly God would get her out of this. Walter could have saved her. But it was out of his hands. And if she made it out of this, then as soon as he had her, he would never let anyone touch her again.

(((O)))

*"I surrender myself to you. I surrender myself to the Tower. Lighten in me what is dark. Fill me with the power I need to survive. Save me, Maturin."*

A tear trickled down her cheek. "Save me," she said out loud.

And then she felt it. A shimmer. It started deep within her body and seemed to radiate out of her. She gasped. Her eyes flew open. She was surrounded in a shimmering silvery light, just like when Pennywise had put her under his deadlights and made her float. Except that the light was only enclosing her. And there were dark tendrils mixed in with the silver. She put her arms out. The dark and silver energy started to gather there. Her body heat flashed hot and cold, or maybe it just the energy that was coursing through her.

Roman had turned into Pennywise. The clown slashed out with his arms which had been elongated into razor sharp pincers. And still Roland shot on. The door shattered open. Rachel stood. A white heat seared through her now. She focused her energy into her hands. The mob came in.

Walter watched as the dust that made up Rachel turned from blue into a silvery black.

Like she was channeling the very power of the Tower itself.

He knit his brow as a mix of emotions started to feel him, mainly confusion but something else too—fear.

Walter Padick, the Man in Black...was afraid.

(((O)))

"MOOOOOVE!"

It was as if her voice had been amplified. Roland and Pennywise both turned to her. They both took off running away from the front of the shop. Energy flew from Rachel's outstretched hands like a cannon blast. Bodies were thrown backwards, which sent other bodies flying back like a domino effect. But the magic didn't stop there. A wave of shimmering silvery black spread out. The people that were at the windows still trying to get in started writhing. The magic from the Tower was meant to hold back evil.

And the people of Tull were full of it. For the corrupt religion spread by Sylvia Pittston, who had also been corrupted by the Man in Black, had infected the influence of the congregation. And as the power of the Tower touched them, they died, writhing and screaming they died as if they had been poisoned.

And inside of the general store, the girl who had so miraculously conjured the magic, lay on the floor...

As if she were dead herself.

---

Walter was so furious, one of his two-skins came to give him a message, and instead of telling the man to be quiet, he told him to stop breathing.

The man now lay dead on the floor.

She had harnessed the magic of the Tower. She had to have. But how was that possible? Walter was usually the epitome of calm, now it felt like his very insides were shaking. He needed her on his side, now more than ever. There was no other option. He had thought he had accomplished that the previous night, but apparently not. The clown had to be taken out of the picture. He had to form a wedge between them somehow, one that would sever their relationship for good.

What had become his conquest had now become his competition. Rachel Porter had finally accessed her powers. But Walter had meant his own. But this...this was a different ball of wax.

There were thirteen orbs in Maerlyn's Rainbow, one for each of the twelve animal guardians. And then there was Black Thirteen, the one that represented the Tower itself.

And now Rachel was harnessing the power of the Tower. Thirteen orbs. Thirteen guardians.

Rachel had become a guardian of the Tower.

Rachel...had become Walter's enemy—an enemy that he was both desperately and hopelessly...

In love with.



## 19. Chapter 18

Stars. Rachel had never seen so many stars. In fact, no one ever had. Except for astronauts. And even they wouldn't have seen them like this. Some were brighter than others. Bits of reddish pink dust, like nebulas, dotted the sky. And was that a couple of galaxies she saw in the distance? She was in outer space, that much was certain. And she was standing on something. Something dark and stone that had four spears rising up around her. She started walking around and felt something soft and satiny rub against her legs. She glanced down at herself. She was wearing a fitted spaghetti strap dress with a plunging neckline. It was similar to the one she wore the first time she was in the Tower, but this one was black that shimmered blue depending on how the light hit it. Wait a minute. The Tower! Was this the top of it she was standing on? Rachel knew she should be freaked out, yet somehow she wasn't. She saw something large float towards her. Something that should not have been seen in outer space.

"Maturin!" Her face lit up with joy and she actually gave a little hop. "You're here. You're actually here!"

"As are you, my child." Maturin gave a nod of his head.

"Is this the Tower?"

"Indeed it is."

Rachel's gaze turned upward. "I am...in shock. It's a good shock, but...wow! I'm in like, outer space!"

Maturin chuckled. "Indeed you are."

And then Rachel thought of something. How as she able to be in outer space and still be able to breathe? Did she die? Or was this simply just another astral projection type experience? And what happened to Roland and Pennywise?

"What uh...how are the others?"

"They are fine. Although you will be missing one of your trio when you return."

Rachel's chest tightened. "What?! Which one?"

"Pennywise has been wounded. He will need to rest. To heal."

Rachel shook her head. They had just gotten back together. And now this.

"He got hurt because of me. Because of me and Roland. Those people came after us."

"They came after you because they had been deceived. But *you* have set them free."

Rachel tried to remember. She had unleashed her powers, but right after that, she had blacked out.

"So I healed them. Is that what happened? They're all...okay now?"

"No, child. They are dead."

Rachel's face fell. She started shaking her head. "No. No, no, no." She put her hand over her mouth. "We killed all those people?" Her voice broke.

"They would not have stopped."

"Because of Walter!" Rachel spat, her hands into fists now. "This happened because of him! *Everything* happens because of him!"

She was furious now. She wanted to hurt him. Did the man know no bounds when it came to ruining people's lives? She took a deep, calming breath. As much as she didn't even want to think about Walter right now, she had questions. And she had a feeling Maturin was the only one who could answer them.

"Sooo those powers I used...are they Walter's? Pennywise's? A combination of both?" She waved her hands as she spoke.

"They are neither."

Rachel's eyebrows shot up.

"Your powers came...from the Tower."

(((((O))))))

Cold. Rachel's hand was so cold. She still hadn't woken up. Roland had carried her back to her room and placed her in her bed. Pennywise had been injured with several deep cuts and stabs so he couldn't change back into Roman. So once again Roland was left playing guardian.

Allie was standing behind Roland, wringing her hands. "She'll wake up. She...she has to wake up. This is just like last time."

Roland held Rachel's lifeless hand up near his face. "Her husband was here last time. He was able to bring her out of it."

Allie slapped her thigh. "Oh piss on him! That young man has been in and out of here so much..." She crouched down next to Roland. "*You* are the best match for her. Anyone can see that. You have *always* been here for her."

(((((O))))))

Rachel pointed downwards. "From t-the Tower?"

"Yes."

"Ohhh boy." She put her hands on either side of her temple and started shifting from foot to foot. "So that means that mirror did turn into a portal," she said to herself more that Maturin.

"When you accepted your true destiny, the Tower opened up to you, both in the clothing shop, and then again this afternoon. Your destiny is the Tower, and all that leads to it."

Rachel's eyes grew wide. Did that mean Roland as well? Or did it mean Walter? And in what way concerning either of them?

She laced her hands behind her head. "Oh, this is messed up. This is so messed up. I think Roland is falling in love with me. And Walter...

well I'm not even going to tell you what he wants, even though I'm sure you already know." She spread out her arms. "I am just one woman. I can't handle all of this. And now I have this baby to worry about on top of that."

"*Rachel.*"

She glanced behind her. She could have sworn she heard someone call her name.

"*RACHEL!*"

She knew that voice. Walter wasn't just calling her, he was screaming.

Rachel dropped her arms. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"You need to return, child. You have been gone for too long. He can feel it."

"Ugh." Great. Now she was going to have to answer Walter's questions about why she wasn't responding to him.

(((O)))

Roland released Rachel's hand and stood. Allie stood with him.

"You think it's that simple?"

"I know it is," Allie said heatedly. "That girl needs stability. She needs companionship. She needs love."

Roland sighed and placed his hands on his hips.

"I mean it, Roland. Step up for her. Do anything she asks, even if it's to fill her husband's spot in her bed."

Roland's eyebrows knit together. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying Roman has had his chance. He has had countless chances from the way it sounds." Allie came up closely and lowered her voice. "I'm telling you to be the *man* she needs."

(((O)))

"If Walter saw all of this," Rachel gestured around her, "do you think he would change his mind?"

"No, child." For once, Maturin's voice held a ring of desperation. "Do not let him into the Tower. Under any circumstances."

"I still have so, so many questions, Maturin," Rachel said desperately.

"And in time, child, you shall get your answers. But for now, be at peace and return, Guardian of the Tower. Farewell."

Rachel saw a bright light.

(((O)))

*Cough. Cough.*

Roland's gaze automatically want to Rachel.

*Cough. Cough.* "Roland..." *Cough.*

He went to her. "What is it? Tell me what you need?"

"I'm so...*cough*...cold." She coughed some more.

Her covers were at her waist. He pulled them up to her chest. "Better?"

"Not really." *Cough, cough.* "I think it's because," she let out a wheezing sound, "I used up all my energy." *Cough, cough.*

Roland grabbed her hand and held it. "Is there anything you need? Anything at all?"

She shook her head. "Those people," she said in a strained voice. "We killed all those people, Roland." She let out a sob.

Roland hung his head. "I know, Rachel. I know. But we had to."

"We have to stop him. We have to stop Walter. You haven't seen..." She shook her head again. "He wants to destroy this universe. I can't

let him."

Roland gently squeezed her hand. "We *won't* let him. But for now you need to rest. Are you...feeling any pain?"

"No. Just very, very tired."

Roland could hear the weariness in her voice. And he could still hear Allie's voice in his ear. *Be the man she needs*. Roland swallowed. Man. Not demon. Not some miserable excuse for a mate, but the real deal. That's what Allie had meant. He idly rubbed his thumb across the back of Rachel's hand.

"Are you *sure* you don't need anything?"

Rachel turned to face him. The lamplight shown in her eyes. "Can you lay with me? Next to me? While I sleep? I just don't want to be alone."

Her voice was so desperate. So innocent. But if Pennywise came back and saw them...

To Hell with the clown. Literally. He brought her hand up to his mouth and tenderly kissed it. "If that's what you want."

She gave him a shy smile. "It is."

Roland stood. As he was taking off his coat, he heard the door close softly. So Allie had decided to give the pair their privacy. He took off his vest next. And his boots.

Rachel scooted over. He heard her grunt. Was she really that weak after their ordeal? Roland sighed. Without even giving it a second thought, he pulled back the covers, but then stopped.

"What's wrong?" Rachel asked.

He went to drop them. "Nothing. I wasn't thinking."

She held out her hand to stop him. "No, no. It's alright. You won't bother me. I want you to be comfortable too."

Comfortable? As much as he had been wanting this, to just lay next to her and be there for her, Roland didn't know about comfortable. She was mated to a demon and carrying the offspring of another. *Be the man she needs you to be*, his inner voice told him.

Without giving it another thought, he pulled back the covers, being very careful not to brush against her in any way. She was still in her day clothes, but still. He and Allie had not wanted to risk changing her considering they didn't know the extent of the state she was in. Luckily there were two pillows, so they each got one. They both lay flat on their backs. All was quiet for a moment.

"Are you sure you're feeling well?" he finally asked her.

"Yes. Just very drained."

"Let me know if you need anything."

He heard her sigh. "I will."

"Goodnight, Rachel."

"Goodnight." Another deep sigh.

A comfortable silence filled the room. And they slept.

(((((O))))))

Rachel was just about to doze off when she felt a soft presence in the back of her mind. She didn't even have to wonder who it was. But for once instead of trying to fighting him or bickering with him...she gave him back a little nudge.

To let Walter know she was alright.

## 20. Chapter 19

*\*\*\*Rated for sensuality\*\*\**

"Roland."

*Her voice was a whisper in his ear, silky and seductive. He felt a hand slide along his chest.*

"Lay with me, Roland. Bed me."

*The hand slid up farther to caress his face.*

"Roland. You know you want me, Roland."

*Roland opened his eyes and looked to his left and froze, his mouth open in horror. Rachel was lying facing him, learing at him, her hand on his chest. Only it wasn't Rachel. Or at least not the Rachel he knew. Her face was covered in white, cracked paint. Her lips were cherry red with red lines running up her cheeks. Her eyes were yellow. She smiled, revealing bloody, pointed teeth.*

Roland sat up with a gasp. His heart pounded in his chest. Rachel was lying next to him on her side facing away with him, fast asleep.

It had been a dream. He sat up in bed and swiped his hands over his face. He glanced at her again. It was still dark through the curtain. He pulled back the covers and swung his legs out of bed. Where had that nightmare come from? Was it from being around Pennywise so much and knowing that Rachel was tied to him? Or was someone trying to tell him something? Or maybe it had just been what it was, a nightmare.

Roland stood. He needed space. He needed a breath of fresh air. Rachel would be fine for a while. There was no way anyone would try to mess with her that fast, not even Walter. Roland left the room. What he didn't see as he made his way down the stairs...

Was a black sleeved arm from inside Rachel's room quietly close the door.



(((((O))))))

She was lying on her side facing away from him, covered up to her shoulder. The lamp had been left on, but the flame was low. So the gunslinger had decided to leave her an extra sense of security for the night. How touching.

Walter took off his jacket and threw it on top of the chest. His vest came next. He trailed his fingers along the mattress. He lifted the sheets and sidled in next to her, though he didn't lay down completely just yet. Lifting his right hand, he let it hover over her, starting from her chest and moving down to her stomach. The trace of the same kind of magic that the black orb emitted met him. And her body temperature felt significantly cooler. Other than that he felt no signs of illness or distress in either her or her babe.

Yet earlier that afternoon, he had lost his connection with her completely. He had called to her, over and over, but had not even felt a presence much less gotten a response. He leaned on his left elbow and caressed her soft tresses with his fingertips. The gunslinger would be back soon.

If this had been a week ago, Walter would have put her into a deeper slumber and taken her in her sleep. He wanted to take her now, but in a different way. But as much as he ached to have her with him, he didn't know if he should risk teleporting her such a long distance.

So he decided to do something else...something he had been aching to do just as badly. He slid until his body was flush up against hers. He nudged his arm under hers and pulled her close against him. Just to feel her body warmth. Breathe in her smell. It was the closest thing to Heaven that Walter Padick would ever get. Rachel moaned in her sleep and turned over on her back. Her face was now just inches from his. He longed to kiss her. Or to run his hands along her. Oh the things he could do to her in her sleep. He slid his hand down between her breasts, along the buttons of her blouse. He could almost feel her smooth skin beneath his hands. So why not? She was already carrying his child. And every day she was a step closer to becoming his. He hovered his hand over her chest and, one by one, the buttons of her blouse opened as if by invisible fingers. When they were all the way undone, he pulled her blouse open to expose her left breast.

He started groping her, kneading her tender flesh. He worried her nipple with his thumb and as he did so, he watched her face, trying to see if he could stimulate her in her sleep.

She moaned again. The corner of Walter's mouth lifted into a grin. He groped her some more and when she started squirming, he removed his hand. No need to wake her up. But she would eventually. And she would have questions, and this time they would not be about Walter, but the man who had been lying next to her. Walter grinned sadistically. And now the gunslinger would have his doubts and questions about her as well due to the little dream that Walter had just planted in his mind.

Walter waved his hand over her shirt and the buttons came back together again. He slid out of bed as quietly as he could and covered her back up.

He gave her a gentle pat. "Sleep tight, kitty cat," he muttered.

He only had a few seconds to vanish before the door opened.

(((((O))))))

Rachel woke up with a start. Roland was lying next to her, hovering over her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Rachel's heat pounded. She felt a slight pressure on her abdomen and realized it was Roland's hand. She felt her mound start to throb and then realized that it had already been doing that.

"No, that's okay."

"Are you alright?"

He must have sensed her nervousness. Something had woken her. And she had felt things in her sleep. Arms around her and a kneading sensation at her breast.

"Yes." She swallowed. "I just...you startled me, that's all."

"Do you need anything?"

His hand drifted up farther to right below her breast. Her breath caught in her throat. Had Roland been doing things to her in her sleep? It couldn't have been a dream. There were just feelings, and no face to go with them.

"I'm good, thanks." She let out a shaky breath.

"Are you sure? You seem uneasy. Did something happen while I was gone?"

Rachel's brow knit. "Gone? When did you leave?"

"Several minutes ago."

Rachel sat up. Something was not adding up. At all. Either she had had a very realistic dream or someone had been in her room with her. Walter maybe? But he would have had to have timed it perfectly.

Or Roland had been lying. Could it have been him? Did he try to get familiar with her while she slept? Had he gotten tired of waiting his turn while Walter and Pennywise went back and forth with her?

She shivered and pulled the covers up to her chin and held them there.

"Rachel...I know something's bothering you. I really wished you would talk to me."

She hated the concern in his voice. Usually it was a balm to her, but now it just irritated her.

What if it had been him who had pawed her up in her sleep? How would she feel about that? Confused? (hell she was confused now). Betrayed? Aroused?

She was tired of games. Of feeling like she was some kind of pawn.

"I just want to be left alone," she said in a hoarse voice.

The room grew as still as a dead man's heartbeat. Finally she heard

the bed creak. Roland pushed the covers back. He started to get out of bed.

What in the hell was she doing? Whether or not it had been Roland's hands on her, she was finally getting what she wanted. What she really wanted. A man who was worth a damn to pay her attention. How could she have been so blind? Roland was there. Had always been there. And now he was leaving.

"Wait!"

She reached her hand out to rest on his back. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing away from her.

"I didn't...I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I think I'm just scared. And tired of being scared."

She could see Roland hang his head in the lamplight. Could hear him sigh.

"I didn't mean I wanted to be *alone* alone, I just..."

"What do you want, Rachel?"

His voice sounded weary. She didn't blame him. His question was easy though. There was one thing she wanted more than anything.

"Peace. I just want peace."

Roland turned sideways and scooted back onto the bed. "I don't know if I can promise that. The journey we have ahead of us...who knows what will happen. But if you want peace from someone *personally*... I can give it to you. If nothing else...I can give that to you."

"You have given me more than you realize," Rachel said in a small voice. "And I will be eternally grateful for that."

Silence again. But a more peaceful one this time.

"I don't...know if I'll be able to sleep again. Can you...hold me...for the rest of the night?"

(((O)))

Roland thought of the nightmare he had just had. There had been nothing in there of the woman who sat next to him. Yet as frail and delicate as she was, there was a power within her, though it was not one of evil. It was one of good. How could he deny this of her? *Be the man she needs.*

"Now that I can do."

(((O)))

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief. She lay back down, and he joined her. She didn't know if she felt quite comfortable facing him with his arms around her, so she decided to put her back to him. She had wanted to try something anyway.

She felt him move up to right behind her and slowly, he put his arms around her. He didn't scoot right up next to her though, and neither did she to him. Rachel scowled. Something didn't feel right for sure. Although Roland had agreed to this, it had taken a minute for him to answer her, almost as if he had to think about it. And another thing was, Roland was a tall man, so she had always felt dwarfed in his embrace. She tried to think about the feeling of the arms that had held her earlier. There had been a big difference. Which only left one answer for the things she had felt tonight.

Walter.

So he really did think of her as his. As his little toy to play with and touch whenever and however he wanted to. She thought of their kiss just two nights before—the kiss that she had insinuated. And now, tonight, lying in Roland's warm, comfortable, protective embrace, she realized something that made her blood run cold.

She had made a big, *big* mistake.

## 21. Chapter 20

Walter was pounding into her. Hard. Every thrust reverberated deep within her core. He fucked her so hard, the bed actually shook. His mouth opened and she heard him call her name. Wait. Shouldn't she be calling his? He did it again, but his voice sounded different, more like Roland's.

"Rachel!"

Rachel's eyes popped open. Her bed was indeed shaking. Roland was sitting up next to her. The dresser against the wall shook too. Her North Star choker moved around on the dresser top. Her eyes grew wide. Walter's vial. What if it fell over and came open? She clambered over Roland. She pulled open the top drawer and grabbed the vial of the precious liquid, then sat on the floor, clutching it to her chest. A few shakes more and the earthquake finally subsided.

((((O))))

Over in New York City, a boy named Jake Chambers felt the quake as well as he lay in bed. He sat up, his eyes also growing wide with shock. He knew all too well what that earthquake meant.

The Man in Black was trying to bring down the Tower.

((((O))))

Rachel and Roland sat there for a minute, staring at each other.

"Well that was uh...interesting." Rachel stood. She set the vial carefully on the dresser top. "I wonder if he did any damage."

"Did you see anything?"

Rachel turned. "What?"

Roland was sitting with his legs off the bed, facing her. "Did you see anything? Before you woke up?"

"No." It wasn't a lie. She hadn't seen anything pertaining to the

Tower. In fact, she hadn't even really felt anything. It was almost as if...

A dream. It had been a normal dream. Rachel had had a sex dream about Walter. And if he had been pre-occupied with the Tower at the time...

It was a dream her own mind had made up.

"Rachel?"

Roland must have noticed the uneasy look on her face.

"What?"

Roland stood. "Are you sure you didn't see anything?"

"I'm sure. Roland, you know I would tell you, right?"

He reached out to touch a strand of her hair. "I know."

For some reason, Rachel wished he would have touched her face instead. Did that mean that her feelings for Roland were increasing? Or just that she was getting tired of being left sexually frustrated every time she came into contact with Walter? She wished Roman was here. He was the only man she wanted to have these feelings and dreams about.

"Are you sure you're alright?" His hand brushed her arm now.

"Yeah. I just wish Roman would get back. We used to be able to make this work. Back at home. He would go back and forth between Roman and Pennywise. Sometimes we would be at my house, sometimes at the abandoned one where he lived. We didn't have any problems. But now..."

Rachel felt drained all of a sudden, not physically, but mentally and emotionally.

"I'm sure he's just resting."

"He is. Maturin told me so."

Roland raised both eyebrows. "When did you see him? Last night? Just now?"

"Yesterday evening. After I..." She just as soon tell him. "Those powers that I used yesterday. They weren't from Pennywise. Or Walter. They were from the Tower."

---

Walter always enjoyed the screaming. Even after each attack, the children still screamed. It was like an aphrodisiac to his dark soul. He stepped back through the still open portal into the control room at the main base.

"How much damage?"

The two-skin that was working the consul that controlled the machine turned. "Well...there's been some...interesting developments."

Walter was not in the mood for games. "How much?" he demanded. He didn't like the look on the young can-toi's face.

"None."

Walter tilted his head at him and blinked. "What was that?"

"None. The machine...did no damage at all."

---

A dark cloud hung over the room at breakfast. Not a visual one, of course, but Rachel could still feel it. After she had told Roland about her latest Tower visit and her talk with Maturin, he had declared that they were leaving. He had told her to get her stuff together after breakfast, then he had left her room without another word.

Rachel picked at her undercooked eggs. Her stomach had started to feel uneasy after she had gotten up and started moving around. Roland shot a glance between her and her plate and Rachel took a bite. Allie was quiet too. Rachel didn't blame her. In one afternoon, the town of Tull had lost most of its citizens. Allie had said afterwards that she hadn't been surprised, but still. The bartender had to have been in shock.



After breakfast, Allie helped Roland pack up some supplies.

"I left your clothes on top of the chest," Rachel told the bartender.

Allie was wrapping up some fresh corn fritters. "Aww, lady...you should have kept those. They don't fit me no more anyway."

"I don't-"

"I'll buy you some kind of bag to keep them in," said Roland. "That way you can carry other things as well."

Rachel and Allie exchanged a glance and the bartender just shrugged. Roland was sure being bossy all of a sudden. She kind of liked it, although she just knew that he and Roman would start to butt heads again. Rachel shook her head. And the two of them had finally started to get along.

---

"Do we have any more children to watch out for?"

"Yes, sir. There are several more." The two-skin swiped across a screen that displayed several kids, along with their names and locations. "We have trackers looking for them now."

"Excellent," Walter responded. "We will try again. Pronto. There's no way the Tower would have gotten *immune* to our attacks."

No damage. There had been no damage. He needed to talk to her. Face to face. And this time there would be no pleasantries. She would give him the answers he sought.

Or this time it would be her mate he took from her.

If the gunslinger did not do it first.

---

It was a bittersweet farewell. Rachel wasn't exactly on the verge of tears as her and Allie hugged, but Rachel hadn't exactly had any female friends back at home. And she told Allie that.

"I consider you one though," she told the bartender.

Allie gave her a lopsided grin. "Well I guess I kinda feel the same. Take care of yourself. At least you don't have an unborn babe to worry about this time."

Rachel felt her stomach knot. Allie didn't know Rachel's condition. But of course Rachel just smiled. No need to give Allie something else to worry about.

Finally they left the saloon. The sky actually promised rain. Maybe not a downpour, but it would be just enough to help with the beginning of their journey. Rachel adjusted her over-the-shoulder bag that she now carried on her back. Roland had brought her one after breakfast. She had thought about putting her vial in there, but thought better of it. What if she lost her bag, or it got trampled? So the vial sat securely in one of her coat's inner pockets. They were almost to the edge of town when something told Rachel to take a more eastward track. She stopped.

"What?" Roland asked.

She glanced at Roland sheepishly. "I think we should go check on Sylvia."

"Really?" he said flatly.

"Yeah. I know she tried to kill us, but I just...I don't know. Something's telling me to go check on her."

Roland made a sideways gesture in that direction. When they had gotten just yards away from Sylvia's shack, Rachel stopped in her tracks.

"Oh my God," she breathed. She took off running, Roland at her heels.

Sylvia's shack was leaning dangerously to one side. The roof seemed on the verge of collapsing. Rachel ran inside without hesitation.

"Sylvia?" she called.

The preacher woman was sitting on her bed, if a bed was what you could call it, rocking back and forth.

"Sylvia?" Rachel said more gently.

"We can't stay long," said Roland.

Rachel knelt, but not too close, to the woman. "Are you okay?"

"I was warned about you," said Sylvia.

"Sylvia...you need to leave. Your house is about to collapse."

"He told me to stay away from you. And I did. It was not enough."

Sylvia still did not look at Rachel.

"I know you sent your congregation on me. I'm sorry you thought it had to come to that."

And indeed Rachel did feel sorry, as angry at the woman as she was. She and Pennywise had just gotten back together. Now he was gone. Again. Rachel could have died herself, and Roland as well.

The roof made a creaking sound.

"Sorry?" Sylvia finally turned to face Rachel. Rachel gasped. A burned handprint adorned Sylvia's left cheek.

"You are sorry? You have corrupted him, bride of Satan. You have corrupted an angel of God."

Rachel's breath caught in her throat as she stood. When had Walter done this to her? Was it last night, after he had come to Rachel's bed? Had he done this in retaliation? Rachel felt sick. He had already killed for her. And now he had maimed someone's physical appearance. For her.

Sylvia fought to stand. "You have brought a blight upon this town. Their deaths are on you."

Rachel mutely shook her head.

"Yes. You lay down with evil, you beget evil." Sylvia leaned heavily against a post next to her bed. The roof creaked. Dirt sprinkled down.

Rachel felt Roland's hand on her arm. "We need to leave."

"I am so sorry about all he has done to you. But you should have listened. Angel of God or not, you had a powerful, otherworldly being tell you not to do something. You should have listened. You upset him greatly by what you did. And now you paid the price.

Sylvia's chest was heaving. Her hands balled into fists.

"I was supposed to bear the child of the Crimson King. Me!" Sylvia hit the post. More dirt. "You are just a whore. A jezebel."

Rachel's blood heated in anger. "He hollered for me! I was in the Tower and he hollered for ME! Doesn't that tell you something? *I* am the one he missed. I was the one he was concerned about. And yet *I* am the whore!" Rachel was the one hollering now. "I am the whore? *He* is the one who wants me. He is the one. Who. LOVES! ME!"

"NOOOO!"

Sylvia flew at Rachel. She was literally inches away from her when Rachel heard a gunshot blast. Sylvia stopped in her tracks, a bullet hole right in the middle of her forehead. Rachel staggered back in shock and disgust. Sylvia dropped and the impact shook the entire shack. The response was instantaneous. The roof groaned loudly then started to cave in. Rachel and Roland had seconds to evacuate before the entire shack came crashing down around them.

Rachel stood shaking as she watched the dust rise up around the house. Sylvia would have died anyway. Rachel had to tell herself that. The already fragile structure of the home must have been weakened by the earthquake. Rachel had to turn away from the tragic scene. Sylvia had orchestrated Rachel and Roland's murders, and now Roland had murdered her. Because she was going to murder Rachel. It was all enough to make Rachel's head spin.

Walter. All of this stemmed back to Walter. With all the bullshit that Pennywise had put her through, Walter had beaten that in just a week. Many times over. And yet they had both done it for the same reason.

Because they loved her. Or at least Pennywise did. If that was even really possible for a demon.

"This is what they wanted. This is what they WANTED!" Rachel threw her arms wide. She slowly spun in a circle. "This is what you wanted, boys! For me to be the last one standing. Huh?" She started clapping her hands. The sound echoed in the silence. "Bravo to Pennywise and to Walter, the two dark princes in the extremely fucked up fairytale of Rachel Porter! Well you know what? Neither of you win! Yeah that's right. I am done with BOTH OF YOU! You don't get to play me anymore! I make my own destiny from now on!"

The wind whistled around Rachel, like the keen of a ghost. A ghost town. That's what Tull was now. Literally. All because of a demon who decided to play God.

"Fuck you, Walter! You wanted me to scream your name? Well I'm doing it! Right here! In the streets of Tull! I am screaming your name for all the corpses in the streets to hear! Corpses that are here because of *you*! FUCK! YOU! WALTER!"

Rachel collapsed to her knees. Right above her, thunder rumbled. She was done. Done with her life. Or at least the life that she had been expected to live. With the life and the existence that she had always known. The sky opened up. She didn't move. She just knelt in the streets in the pouring rain. She put her face to the sky, letting the drenching torrents cleanse her body and soul. It was time to start anew.

And for once, the pure liquid that was pouring down her face...

Wasn't her own.

***To be continued...***

## **22. Author's note**

If any of you are wondering why I haven't posted any of my story in almost two weeks (that's like a record for me) it's because I had a decision to make. I didn't know if I wanted chapter 20 to be the end of that particular story or not.

So just to let y'all know, Queen of Ash and Dust is officially over. I am doing my story in three parts (just like Lord of the Rings). Stroke of Midnight was the first one, Queen of Ash and Dust was the second, and now we have... Dark Phoenix Rising. I decided to continue it under a different title because Rachel's personal journey from Stroke of Midnight has grown in leaps and bounds. First she was Pennywise/Roman's princess, then she was caught up in an interdimensional (and severely twisted) love triangle (square?)

NOW she has become a lot stronger, not just her character, but her powers as well. She went from being a helpless girl to soon being able to give both Pennywise AND Walter a run for their money.